

EVEN DOGS

Go to Other Worlds

LIFE IN ANOTHER WORLD
WITH MY BELOVED HOUND

3

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Even Dogs Go to Other Worlds: Life in Another World with My Beloved Hound, Volume 3

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Even Dogs Go to Other Worlds: Life in Another World with My Beloved Hound, Volume 3

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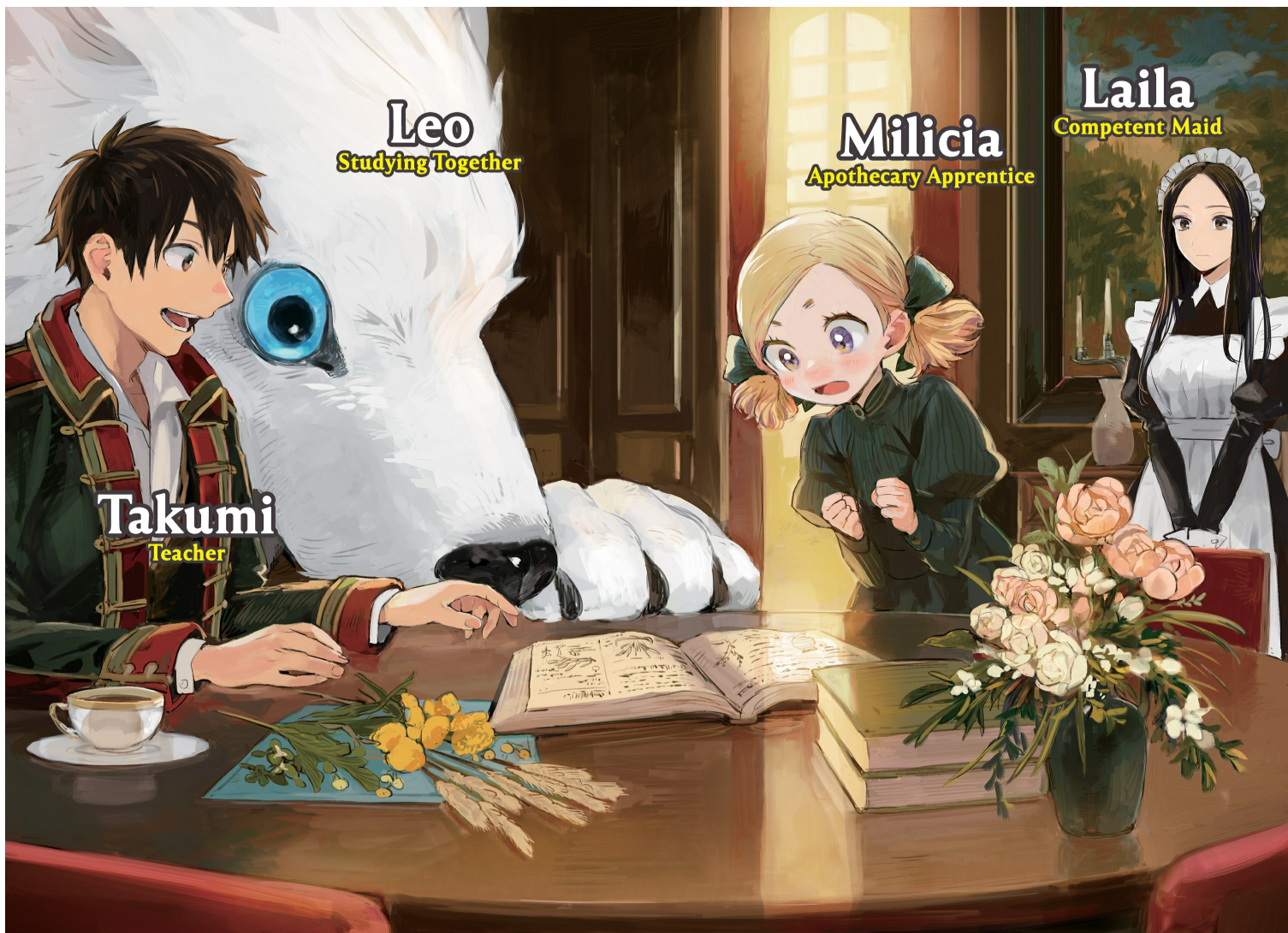
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Leo
Studying Together

Milicia
Apothecary Apprentice

Laila
Competent Maid

Takumi
Teacher



Prologue

THANKS to Herb Cultivation, the power I'd received when I first came to this strange new world, I was able to sign a business contract with the Libert family. Leo, Cherie, Claire, Sebastian, Tilura, and I had just finished the first day of sales at their store in Ractos. Between my high-quality herbs, the lack of medicine in the city, and the mysterious illness spreading like wildfire, we ran out of stock in no time. Now, I could finally breathe again.

I'm so glad my herbs sold... Otherwise, I'd feel horrible for all the trouble I put Claire and the others through. I have Leo to thank for drawing such a crowd, though.

While we were selling the herbs, I was lured away and attacked by Nick, one of the highwaymen who'd ambushed us the first time we were in town. Fortunately, the swordplay Eckenhart taught me was enough to fend him off. I decided to give him a chance to redeem himself, and I more-or-less forced him to work for me by transporting herbs from the Libert villa to the store in town. Fortunately, Claire and Sebastian were very open to the idea.

Now that our work at the Libert's store was done, we were headed to the orphanage. Claire had seemed really worried about the children as we ate lunch, especially with the epidemic spreading through town. I could really sympathize with the kids, given my own situation back in Japan, so I couldn't turn a blind eye to them either. As a result, we decided to go together.

"How about we leave for the orphanage as soon as we finish eating?" I suggested.

"Yes, that sounds perfect," Claire replied before turning to Tilura. "Did you hear that? You'll get to see your friends soon."

Tilura hurriedly gulped down her mouthful of meat skewer. "Really?! Yay! I haven't seen them in forever!"

So Tilura's been to the orphanage before, has she? It sounds like she has a few playmates over there. I'm glad she remembered her manners and didn't spray us all with half-chewed meat when she replied.



"ALL right, I'll leave the rest of the herb sales to you, Kales. Oh, and Nick? Don't slack off," I warned him.

"As you wish," Kales said with a polite bow.

"You got it, boss! No slacking for me!" Nick chimed in.

After we finished eating, we said our farewells to the manager Kales and Nick. My silver fenrir partner Leo was with us, along with Claire's younger sister Tilura, their servant and butler Sebastian, Claire's fenrir pup Cherie, and Phillip the guard.

I guess I'm still a little worried about Nick, but Sebastian said he'll have someone keep an eye on him, so it'll probably be fine.

"Ruff, ruff!" Leo barked.

"Yeah, you did really well back there, Leo!" I gave her a congratulatory pet. "First the kids, and then Nick... You were great. Thanks."

She seemed to enjoy it every bit as much as she did when she was just a little Maltese. "Bow-wow!"

I bet she's still riding the high of filling up on tasty street food with the rest of us.

"So we're going to an orphanage, huh..." I started wondering aloud. "How often do you go, Claire?"

"Ruff?"

"Well, let me think... It's been quite some time since I last visited, but I try to stop by whenever I'm in Ractos."

According to Claire, caring for the domain's orphans was part of the local nobility's job, and establishing orphanages in every major city was pretty much a given. Since it was up to each noble to decide how much tax money to spend

on them, their quality tended to vary greatly. At least the Libert orphanage sounded relatively well-off.

“I’m afraid they still don’t have it as well as the average household does,” she said with a sad smile.

She’d told me before that taxes in the Libert domain were kept to the absolute minimum, and all of House Libert’s wealth came from their business ventures. The orphanage thus received relatively low amounts of taxes, but there were some private sponsors as well. Not only that, but a good number of the children there grew up to be servants or guards at one of the Libert’s mansions, and so many of them volunteered to keep the orphanage running.

Apparently, the maids Laila and Gelda were both from an orphanage, not to mention the guard Nicola and even the guard captain Phillip. Sebastian told me that meant the servants tended to be more loyal than if they were recruiting members of the public.

“Here it is, Takumi,” Claire announced once we’d arrived.

“So this is the place, huh?”

The orphanage was a neatly kept stone building on the easternmost edge of the city. It looked surprisingly like a church—there was a lot of cross imagery, and they even had a tall belfry. I could just imagine a bride and groom coming out of the oaken door. Of course, there wasn’t any stained glass, but I had a hard time imagining it as anything but a church.

Leo sniffed at the building curiously, then cocked her head to the side. “*Sniff sniff* ...Worf?”

“Leo? Everything okay?”



I wonder if they're making lunch in there?

"Ruff, ruff-ruff! Wooo-woooo! Growf..." *Something smells kinda funny. I don't like it*, she seemed to be saying.

"I wouldn't worry too much, girl." I gave her a hearty pat on the flank. "You're probably just imagining things."

As I tried to reassure Leo, Claire approached a young woman sweeping the path out front.

"Excuse me?" she asked. "Is the headmistress here?"

"Yes, she's..." The woman looked up and froze when she saw Claire. "M-Milady?! Please forgive my rudeness! I'll fetch the headmistress right away!"

She ran into the building. Claire knitted her eyebrows as she watched her leave.

"That's odd... Something feels off."

I blinked. "It does?"

I didn't know what the orphanage was supposed to be like, though, so I couldn't tell at all.

That lady did seem a little down, though. Maybe she's worried about something? I know I could only tell when I saw her face, and I bet Claire was the same.

After a minute, a slender middle-aged woman emerged from the church. "Lady Claire, Lady Tilura! What a pleasure it is to see you both again! Thank you both so much for coming!"

"It's certainly been a while, Marontilana," Claire said with a polite nod.

"It's been forever!" Tilura echoed.

Marontilana was dressed in a nun's habit, just like the other woman was. Her clothes covered almost her entire body, with the long black skirt even covering her feet.

So, she's the headmistress... I bet that outfit's torture on sunny days.

The headmistress' expression darkened slightly. "While I would ordinarily welcome you both with open arms, I'm afraid you've picked the wrong time to visit."

"Is something wrong?" Claire asked.

Claire was right. Something's definitely off here.

"I hate to say it, but nearly everyone here has come down with a fever," the nun continued apologetically. "I can't allow you inside with good conscience. Why, if you fell ill as well, I don't know what I'd do."

Sounds like the epidemic has new victims. I don't know what kind of illness it is, exactly, but I can understand not wanting Claire to go inside.

"I see." Claire pursed her lips. "Do you at least have medicine?"

"We were lucky enough to find something cheap, but unfortunately, it has had hardly any effect at all," the headmistress said sadly.

"Medicine that doesn't work..." Claire shot Sebastian a worried look. "What do you think?"

Sebastian returned her look. "Ms. Marontilana? Did the establishment at which you purchased that medicine claim to have ties with nobility?"

Sebastian and Claire were probably worried that the orphanage had run into that fake apothecary's store. Since they were selling diluted medicines, it'd make sense if the orphans didn't get better.

"Why, yes, now that you mention it," Marontilana replied. "We were all quite certain it would be high-quality."

"I see," Claire muttered. "I was afraid of that."

"Is something the matter?" Marontilana asked. "Don't tell me their business has nothing to do with you?"

It'd be fair to assume that the Liberts were the noble family the store was referring to. Most people would think that way, since there wasn't any other notable nobility in the area.

Claire shook her head. "I'm afraid we have nothing to do with them. We also

have evidence that the store has been selling fake medicines.” She turned to Sebastian. “It’s time we did something about this.”

“I couldn’t agree more, milady. Should this farce continue, it would be a blemish on the good Libert name. It seems I was right to send Nicola to notify your father immediately.”

Marontilana’s face fell. “Oh... So you really have nothing to do with them, milady?”

“I’m afraid not. There are still sick people inside, aren’t there?” Claire asked, looking at the orphanage’s tightly shut doors.

Marontilana nodded. “Nearly everyone has caught it, and we don’t have enough funds to purchase proper medicine now. Honestly, I don’t know how I could ever apologize...”

“No, you didn’t do anything wrong,” Claire told her firmly. “It’s that horrible store’s fault for deceiving you and the people of this town.”

“But that false apothecary can wait,” Sebastian said sternly. “Treating the infirmed comes first.”

“Definitely.” Claire turned to me. “I hate to ask so much of you again, but could you prepare some medicine for them, Takumi?”

Looks like I’m up.

“Of course. I completely understand the desire to want to help the sick when you can. I want to help, so don’t think twice about asking me,” I said.

Thanks to Herb Cultivation, I could make as much high-quality medicine as I wanted—within reason, of course.

Marontilana seemed to notice me for the first time. “And who might you be? My, that’s an awfully large wolf you have... No, it’s far too big to be a mere wolf, isn’t it?”

“Oh, of course. This is Takumi. He’s an excellent apothecary,” Claire explained. “Miss Leo here is a silver fenrir, but don’t worry, she doesn’t hurt people.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I said with a bow, which Marontilana returned

politely. "Now you too, Leo."

"Woof!"

"My word..." Marontilana gasped. "She is rather tame, isn't she?"

Both she and the other nun were visibly surprised, but they seemed to take Claire's word.

Leo is pretty calm, after all. I'm not an apothecary, though!

"Milady is attempting to conceal your Gift," Sebastian explained into my ear, picking up on my discomfort. "An apothecary would have ample reason to carry medicine with him."

"Oh. Makes sense," I whispered back.

The fewer people that knew about what I could do, the lower the chances I'd be targeted, after all.

"Could you start right away, Takumi?"

"Sure. Oh, but first, do you mind if I see some sick people first?" I asked. "I'll need to examine them if I'm going to know what kind of medicine will work best."

"A splendid idea," Sebastian agreed. "I happen to possess some knowledge of herbs and maladies myself, and I imagine I could help determine the best medicine."

There was no such thing as a magic cure-all in this world, but with Sebastian there to help give me advice, I should be able to cultivate the best herb for the job on the spot.

Marontilana hesitated. "But what if you catch it yourselves?"

"Don't worry," Claire reassured her. "Even if we all get sick, none of us would hold you accountable. Besides, with Takumi here, we have nothing to fear from any kind of illness."

If we waited around any longer, Marontilana would probably just try to convince us otherwise. Leaving Leo, Phillip, Tilura, Johanna, and Cherie outside, the three of us entered the orphanage.

Chapter 1: Befriending an Orphan Girl

“OH, my...” Claire gasped.

“This is even worse than I dared imagine,” Sebastian said, mirroring her sad tone.

After entering the orphanage, we were shown to the room where the sick children were, and both Claire and Sebastian were shocked. It was evidently a common room before, but now it was filled with beds and half-unconscious children. Something about it struck me as off, however.

“Wait, this looks familiar,” I muttered.

“Does it?” Claire asked.

I didn’t know much about illnesses, but I’d seen symptoms just like theirs before. Between their flushed, feverish complexions and their hoarse coughing, I was pretty sure. It looked like they had the flu, but I didn’t know if they even had the same strains in this world. I decided to get a second opinion just to be sure.

“What do you think, Sebastian?” I asked him for his opinion.

He scanned the room before settling on one of the children and approaching them. “Pardon me.” He checked one child first, then a few others, measuring their temperature with the back of his hand and looking inside their mouths.

He pulled back and composed himself. “While I cannot be sure, I believe these children are suffering from the same malady that struck Lady Tilura.”

“The same thing...?” Claire muttered worriedly. I could tell that seeing so many kids in so much discomfort was starting to get to her.

Tilura had the same symptoms when I first came to the Libert villa. The only difference between this and my world’s flu was that this strain seemed to have a more persistent fever. Sometimes different people show different symptoms,

but given how similar the kids' symptoms were to Tilura's, it seemed that wasn't the case here.

"I didn't know you guys had the flu here," I muttered to myself.

"The flu? Mr. Hirooka, do you know what this is?" Sebastian asked.

"I think so. It's pretty common in my world."

Pretty much everyone catches it at some point. It can get serious sometimes, sure, but it isn't anything some cold medicine and rest can't cure. I'd probably call it one of the most common diseases out there.

"Mr. Hirooka?" Sebastian asked. "Should this prove to be the same illness as Lady Tilura's..."

"You'd like me to make some capwort?" I finished for him.

"Precisely."

Sebastian wasn't a doctor, but his opinion here seemed like a safe assumption to me, especially since he'd been looking after Tilura the whole time she was sick. A little capwort was all it took to get Tilura back on her feet, so with any luck, the orphans would feel better soon, too. Making more capwort would be easy enough.

Somehow, I get the feeling this won't be the last time I cultivate it.

Claire turned to the nuns. "We'll be heading back into the garden now, Marontilana. Could you keep an eye on the children?"

"Of course, milady."

With that, the three of us stepped outside.

"I'll leave the rest to you, Takumi," Claire said. "Now, I realize this isn't under our sales agreement..."

"Don't worry," I cut her off. "I want to save the kids as much as you do."

Sebastian nodded understandingly. "We shall nonetheless discuss your compensation when we return to the mansion."

I didn't especially want a reward since I considered this as volunteer work. Either way, I wasn't going to sit and watch a whole orphanage suffer.

“Oh, right!” I suddenly realized. “Before I start cultivating, I need to know how many people there are here.”

“Roughly thirty, I recall, including the adults,” Sebastian said.

Thirty, huh... Just to be safe, I should make some for us, too, so let's say forty doses total.

“All right, I'll get started, then.”

Claire nodded. “By all means.”

With that, I crouched down in an out of sight area and put my hand to the ground, and little by little, I began cultivating the familiar capwort.

After I'd grown all forty, I took them to the carriage and dried them out so that they could be put to immediate use before handing them over to Marontilana. She set about giving each child their dose. Some kids got out of bed almost immediately after, whereas others took about an hour to get back on their feet. My best guess was that it had to do with how long the kids were sick, and Sebastian agreed that was the most likely answer. Some kids were probably naturally more energetic than others, of course, but how long the disease had been messing up their bodies seemed like a more likely factor. It could also have something to do with their natural immune systems too.

After the kids were back on their feet, Marontilana gathered them all to thank me.

“Thank you very much for your aid,” she said.

“Thank you!” the kids all echoed.

“Haha... I'm just glad I could help,” I replied awkwardly.

Seeing the kids go from pained to playful was its own reward, after all.

“I must admit, I'm impressed you could make so much medicine so quickly,” Marontilana remarked.

“I told you Takumi was an excellent apothecary,” Claire replied.

I'm starting to worry if that excuse will keep holding up, though.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” I handed Marontilana some more medicine. “Please,

take this.”

“More medicine? Whatever for?”

“Just in case things get bad again. There’s a chance the kids just don’t have symptoms now, after all. If anyone gets sick again, just give them that.”

The flu also had a dormant period where you didn’t see any symptoms, so it wouldn’t have surprised me if some of the orphans or nuns got sick again soon. I didn’t want to have to explain that, though, so I went with the simpler explanation.

“You should take some, too,” I said as I gave Claire and Sebastian some medicine. “There’s enough for Tilura and the others outside. Just keep in mind that you probably won’t seem sick right away.”

“All right,” Claire nodded.

“I shall take it to them right away.” With that, Sebastian left to take the medicine to the others.

I’m really glad I made extras, but if the disease is this bad at the orphanage, there’s no telling how far it’s spread through the city. I’d better make enough capwort for all the servants as soon as we get back to the mansion.

“I’m so glad your diagnosis was right,” Marontilana sighed.

“I couldn’t agree more.” Claire nodded. “But Marontilana, capwort is supposed to be common around here, isn’t it? I thought it was merely a coincidence that we couldn’t find any when Tilura was sick, but is there something else at work here?”

“Ever since the epidemic broke out, someone has been buying up all the capwort they can find,” she explained. “I heard a rumor that there’s a rather unpleasant mystery disease out there, and they’re running all sorts of experiments to try and find a cure.”

So, someone rich bought all the medicine for those experiments, huh? That would explain the shortage.

“I did quite a bit of asking around at the usual peddlers,” she continued, “and it seems as though someone bought their entire inventory a little over two

weeks ago. When I heard there was a new store that sold capwort remedies for cheap, why, I thought it was a godsend.”

“I see,” mused Claire. “And that new store is the one selling diluted medicine.”

At that moment, Sebastian returned. “It is done, milady.”

We took a moment to fill him in on our findings.

“Hmm... That would indeed explain why we could not find medicine for Lady Tilura,” he mused.

Most stores were already out of stock by then, so they couldn’t find any for Tilura. That prompted Claire to head alone to the Fenrir Forest, where I first met her.

Huh... We might never have met if not for that, I realized.

Claire pursed her lips. “First that rotten apothecary, then the epidemic... This doesn’t sit well with me.”

“Nor does it me,” Sebastian agreed. “We’d best conduct a thorough investigation.”

“Uh... Is there something else I’m missing here?” I asked.

Claire nodded. “You see, that disreputable merchant set up shop at *almost exactly* the same time the epidemic began.”

“The merchant began their operations a little over two weeks ago,” Sebastian explained. “The epidemic began spreading in earnest at almost precisely that same time. By then, someone had already bought out all the capwort in Ractos.”

“So you think that apothecary is responsible for everything?” I guessed.

“Likely not *everything*, but at the very least, we can assume that merchant was the one who cleaned out all the other stores’ inventory,” Sebastian said.

Okay... So, if I understand correctly, the merchant knew the epidemic was about to start, so they set up shop. Then, they bought all the medicine from every store in town, so they’d get all the business.

“What if the medicine they’re selling is just the same stuff they bought from the stores all over town, just watered down?” I wondered aloud.

Sebastian nodded. “That is indeed a possibility. Now if you’ll pardon me, milady, I’d best get to work.”

“By all means.”

With that, Sebastian left once again.

“Where’s he going?” I asked her.

“He’s going to investigate the incident directly. It seems a tad too much for Nicola to handle on his own, after all.”

“Makes sense.”

It would probably be a lot more than just looking into it—he’d have to report back to Claire and her father as well, not to mention limiting the damage done where he could.

“Do you mind if we stay here until he returns?” Claire asked the nuns.

“Of course not, milady! The children would be thrilled to have you!”

Having received Marontilana’s permission, we headed out into the garden to relax, and most of the children followed us. Those who were still too weak to get up were still resting in bed, of course. Leo and Tilura came around the outside to join us.

“All right, Leo, time to play!” I exclaimed, giving her the go-ahead.

“Ra-ruff!”

Leo was overjoyed to see so many kids, and she didn’t need to be told twice. She bounded right toward them, ready to play. The yard wasn’t as big as the mansion’s was, but there was still plenty of room for her to run around.

The kids all squealed with laughter.

“Wow, she’s so big!”

“She’s so fluffy!”

“Whoa, cool!”

“Hahaha!”

Even Tilura cackled with laughter. “We can finally play together again!”

Oh, right. I guess she did mention having come here before.

“Arf, arf!” Cherie started barking and wagging her tail at the kids from her perch on Leo’s back.

Claire, Marontilana, and I sat at a table in the shade of the orphanage, relaxing and watching them all play.

“I’m glad they’re all doing better,” I said with a smile.

“We have you to thank for that, Takumi,” Claire said. “Why, I’m quite enjoying myself simply watching them.”

Marontilana gave us both a grateful smile. “Honestly, I don’t know how we could possibly thank you both.”

Just seeing the kids healthy again is thanks enough, though.

“Um, excuse me?” I heard a timid voice from behind me. “Are you the apothecary?”

“I guess that’s me.” I turned around to find a young girl in a very simple dress standing there. She was probably an orphan.

Marontilana leaned out of her seat to get a look at her. “Milicia? Is something wrong?”

“I’m sorry, Headmistress. I just wanted to thank him properly.” She turned back to me, smiled, and curtsied politely, her head bobbing with her. “Thank you very much for saving us, sir. I’m feeling a lot better now.”

“Milicia is our oldest orphan,” Marontilana explained to me. “Normally, we’d have sent her out into the world to work by now, but she’s been helping us out here instead.”

“I just want to be there for the others,” Milicia explained. “Headmistress, I still don’t want a job. All I want is to help people.”

Marontilana sighed and shook her head. “As you can see, she’s determined to stay.”

I could tell that she wanted nothing more than to see Milicia leave and live her own life, but since she just wanted to help, Marontilana couldn't bring herself to kick the girl out.

Marontilana doesn't seem the type to kick any kid out, actually... I guess she's the generous type, too.

"Milicia, won't you reconsider my offer to work for me at the villa?" Claire asked with her nicest smile.

Being a servant seemed like a pretty good way to help people, after all. I couldn't count all the times Laila and Gelda lent me a hand.

Milicia shook her head. "I need to properly thank the headmistress for taking such good care of me. That's why I'm helping her." She looked back at me, admiration filling her eyes. "You're really amazing, sir. You saved everyone so easily!"

Is it just me, or is she looking at me the same way Tilura did when we first met?

"You want to help people, do you?" I asked. "What kind of work would you like to do?"

"I, um..." She started thinking hard, and I could tell she wasn't going to come up with an answer soon.

I bet she knows she wants to help others, but she has no idea how to yet.

I knew that feeling well. Having a goal was one thing, but having a plan was a different matter altogether. Her desire to help people seemed to come directly from her gratitude toward the people at the orphanage, and there was nothing wrong with that.

"Well, what if you sold vegetables?" I suggested. "You know all those greengrocers on main street?"

"Yes, I know them."

"Don't you think they're helping people? If they didn't sell veggies, then nobody would be able to buy them."

Her face fell. "But... But that's a *business*."

She had a point. At the end of the day, all those merchants were in it to turn a profit, not to make sure people didn't go hungry.

"That doesn't mean they don't make people happy, though. Without them, only farmers would be able to eat vegetables. Doesn't that count as helping people?" I pointed out.

"Well...maybe."

Even when I thought of helping people, though, what first came to mind was taking care of the needy and contributing to the country directly. It was easy to get stuck on that line of thinking, though, which was probably why Milicia felt lost. It made more sense if she found something that she *wanted* to do, then found a way to tie that into helping others.

"So, tell me, Milicia, what do you want to do? How do you want to help people?" I asked, trying to help her think it through.

"Um... Let me think..." She puzzled over it for a good long while, her expression subtly shifting as she went through all her options. "Well, I was happy when you saved us, sir. I was also happy when the orphanage took me in."

"Those both sound like good things to be happy about," I nodded.

"But... I can't do either of those things."

"Why is that?"

"I can't run an orphanage on my own, and I don't know how to make medicine."

"Well, anything you don't know, you can learn if you study. Just think about what you want to do, then look at yourself and figure out what you would need to do it. Then you just work on what you're lacking. It might take a while, but you'll reach your goal eventually," I told her.

There were some things that no amount of effort could accomplish, of course, but I was unsure about telling her that now. The world was full of nasty surprises and speed bumps, but that didn't mean she couldn't achieve her dreams. At the very least, I didn't want to be the bearer of bad news.

“I can learn if I study?” She looked up and stared me square in the eye. “Then please, sir, teach me about medicine!”



“Wait, what?”

“Milicia! Don’t be rude!” Marontilana chided her. “I imagine Mr. Hirooka is extremely busy.”

She wants to study under me? I barely know anything about medicine myself. I’m just bluffing my way through this with Herb Cultivation. I’m not even a real apothecary.

I looked to Claire for help, but she only smiled warmly.

Nope, she’s not going to help me. Is it just me, or is she looking forward to seeing how I react?

“I-I’m not that busy, but, uh... Why do you want to learn about medicine?”

“I couldn’t do anything to help everyone, even when they got really sick. But then you came in, sir, and you healed everyone right away, like it was nothing! Look at how happy everyone is now!”

I broke Milicia’s gaze briefly to look at the kids as they played with Leo. “I know what you mean. Just seeing everyone happy and healthy is its own reward.”

“Then you’ll teach me?!” she cried.

“Hold on, I never said that. I’m basically one of Claire’s people, so you’ll have to go through her.”

Claire raised an eyebrow. “Forcing the decision on me, are you?”

Milicia’s eyes were full of anticipation, but I couldn’t teach her if I lived at the villa and she lived at the orphanage. She couldn’t make the trip on her own, and even though I wasn’t all that busy, I still couldn’t afford to come into town every day between my cultivation experiments and my sword training. The only way to do it would be if Claire found a way—not to mention that I didn’t have anything to teach her in the first place.

I turned back to the table, lowering my voice so only Claire could hear me. “I’m not forcing anything on you. Without your permission, I can’t do anything.”

“So, what would you like me to do, then?” she whispered back.

“Well, I honestly don’t know how I can teach her. But at the same time, I don’t want to shut her down when she’s clearly so passionate about it. So, uh... I know this is a pretty big deal, but...”

“You want her to live in the mansion with us. Otherwise, you won’t be able to teach her, correct?”

“Y-Yeah.”

To be precise, though, we’d just be learning together. I had some common knowledge from life in Japan, but I wasn’t a doctor or anything, so we’d have to rely on Sebastian and his books.

“Well, I was planning on hiring her as a servant, so I don’t have a problem with welcoming her into the household, but...” Claire trailed off.

“Is there a problem?”

“You realize she won’t be staying in your room, don’t you?”

“O-Of course not! Please, please put her in a different room! There’s no way I could share a room with a girl, ever!”

She started mumbling to herself, not seeming to even hear what I’d said. “But I’m a girl, too... Am I too old...? He likes them young...?”

For some reason, I got the distinct feeling she was muttering about me.

“Uh... Claire?”

She suddenly shook her head, blushing. “N-Nothing! I didn’t say anything!” She quickly composed herself before continuing. “If you’ll be in different rooms, then I don’t see a problem with it. She’ll probably be in a servant’s room, though, instead of a guest room.”

“Don’t worry,” Marontilana added, overhearing us. “She’s been living with the other children for years, and she takes to it just fine.”

That common room did look pretty crowded, so she’s probably right.

With that, I turned back to Milicia. Her eyes were still brimming with determination as she waited for me to announce her fate.

“I have Claire’s permission now. You’ll have to live in the servants’ quarters,

but if you don't mind that, we can learn together."

Her expression immediately brightened. "Really?! Thank you so much!"

"Are you sure about this, Mr. Hirooka?" Marontilana asked.

"Of course." I smiled. "I'm only worried that I won't have much to teach her, since I have quite a ways to go myself."

Marontilana seemed satisfied by my response, and she and Milicia both bowed deeply. She seemed to notice Milicia wasn't bowing enough, however, and put a hand on her back to urge her lower until Milicia was practically at a right angle.

Uh... She doesn't have to be that grateful.

"Mr. Hirooka?" a familiar voice whispered from behind me. "You do realize you'll have to tell young Milicia everything, don't you?"

"Oh, Sebastian, you're back."

I didn't even notice him coming into the room.

"Yes, I have returned," he announced before turning to Claire. "Milady, you'll be pleased to know that I have left the investigation in capable hands. We need but wait for their findings. In fact, we may receive a report as early as tomorrow or the day after."

"I see. Thank you, Sebastian."

If he just got back, though, how is he up to speed on the whole Milicia situation already? What a mystery.

"I guess I should ask," I whispered to Claire and Sebastian. "Is it all right if I tell her about my Gift?"

Claire nodded. "If you trust her."

"I can't well see how you couldn't. You'll hear no complaint from me," Sebastian said.

With that, the three of us took Milicia around the corner of the building where nobody else could see us and where I could give her a demonstration. Marontilana was still looking after the kids and Leo. There was no need for her

to know, after all.

Milicia seemed confused. "What are we doing here?"

I guess it's only natural for her to be a little confused.

"I'm going to do something special now, Milicia. Promise me you won't tell anyone about what you're about to see."

"Huh? O-Okay, I won't."

"This is one of House Libert's most closely guarded secrets," Claire added. "You can't even tell Headmistress Marontilana. Tell nobody."

Milicia gravely nodded a few more times. I could tell she was intimidated.

Did you have to scare her like that, Claire?

"All right, here goes," I said, putting my hand on the ground. "What should I make...? I guess more capwort for the people at the mansion couldn't hurt..."

Milicia looked at me in confusion, but as soon as she saw the capwort spring up from between my fingertips, her eyes widened.

"Huh?!"

Yeah. Surprising, isn't it?

"I guess this is enough." I pulled my hand away and wiped it off.

"Wh-What did you just do?"

"I grew some capwort. Go on, take a look."

She didn't move. I could tell she still didn't believe it.

"This is my power, you see. That's how I was able to get enough medicine for everyone on such short notice."

"O-Okay..."

Sebastian cleared his throat. "Allow me to explain."

With that, Sebastian began giving her the details of my Gift.

Leave it to Sebastian to explain everything. At least now I don't have to.

I sat back and waited for him to finish.



“**SO**, you’re saying, sir... Er, Takumi, sir, that you’re not an apothecary at all?”

“Yep, that’s right. I hope you’re not too disappointed.”

After Sebastian finished his explanation, Milicia seemed to understand. She really seemed to admire what she thought I did, so I wouldn’t be surprised if she lost interest completely in me now. I probably didn’t know any more about herbs than she did. It was better that we tell her now, though, instead of her eventually piecing it together when she came to the villa. There was a chance she’d decide not to come with us at all.

Instead, I was surprised to see her shake her head. “No, I’m not upset. In fact, I still can’t believe you can do that! You’re really amazing!”

If anything, she seemed to admire me even more now than before.

“U-Uh... I really wouldn’t go that far...”

“That’s right, Milicia,” Claire said as she puffed out her chest with pride. “Takumi is one-of-a-kind!”

Okay, Claire, you can both stop it now. Really, I don’t know how to react with both of you praising me so much...

“You put me on the right path when I was lost and confused, sir! It’s all thanks to you that I know exactly what kind of life I want to live!”

“Uh... Okay?”

I wasn’t expecting her to decide everything so quickly and easily. It sounded like she had more in mind than just learning about medicine, too. I probably wasn’t the best role model for her, but if I could help set her on the right path, I’d be glad to do so.

I’m barely an adult myself, though. I really need to find someone to guide me next...

“I swear, sir... no, Master!” She put a hand over her heart. “I’ll carve your every word into my soul! I’ll devote everything I have to studying with you!”

“M-Master...?” I could feel the color drain from my face. “I-I’m really nobody

special, honest! And I'll be learning just as much as you will be!"

"I don't mind. You can teach me all about the mysteries of life, too! Medicine aside, your words awakened me to my true calling!"

Uh-oh... First 'Boss,' and now 'Master'? It's not like I have a problem with all these new titles, but how am I ever going to get used to them?

Claire smiled. "I suppose that makes you Takumi's apprentice, doesn't it?"

"It does!" Her grin grew even wider, and she bowed to the both of us as best she could. "Lady Claire, Master Takumi, thank you so much!"

"It'll be a pleasure to have you, Milicia," Claire said.

I let out a sigh. "Why not? I'm looking forward to studying together, Milicia."

It couldn't hurt to let her call me whatever she wanted, after all, especially since I could tell she wasn't trying to bug me. I still had my misgivings about how quickly she'd decided to alter the trajectory of her entire life, but I'd heard of similar things before, so I didn't dwell on the thought. I was still far from the wise man Milicia seemed to think I was, so instead of criticizing her, it'd be best for both of us if I tried to live up to her expectations instead.

"Let us return to the garden, then," Sebastian suggested. "I imagine the children are growing rather tired."

With that, the four of us returned to where Leo and the others were. Leo herself was taking a nap in the middle of the yard, and she was covered in sleeping orphans, some resting on her back and others buried neck-deep in fluff. I could spot Tilura and Cherie among them.

"Nice job, Leo," I whispered to her.

"Wuff," Leo replied quietly. She certainly seemed pleased with herself.

After that, we headed back to where Marontilana was to discuss Milicia's plans. She probably wouldn't be able to come with us to the mansion right away. She was still recovering from her illness, not to mention she probably needed to pack. There were also goodbyes to be said, even though she'd have plenty of chances to visit in the future. We also told Marontilana not to worry if Milicia changed her mind, since it was all pretty sudden.

“We’d best be going, then,” Sebastian announced.

Claire nodded. “The sun has begun to set, after all.”

“Thank you for everything,” Marontilana said with a bow. “Especially you, Mr. Hirooka.”

After carrying the kids inside and putting them to bed, we decided to head back to the mansion. Milicia and Marontilana saw us out, and with that, we were on the road back to the mansion.

Milicia’s going to be moving in a week, huh... If she wants to say goodbye and pack her things—or, of course, reconsider—that should be plenty of time. I can’t wait.



“**WELL** then, let us be off.”

“All right, Leo, let’s go!”

“Woof!”

“Arf, arf-arf!”

Claire was in the coach with Tilura sleeping in her lap, and Sebastian had the reins. Unlike on the way there, I was on Leo’s back, and Cherie was sleeping in my arms. There wasn’t enough space for me to sit in the carriage with Tilura lying down, after all, and Cherie was determined to ride on Leo’s back no matter what. Leo was very composed the entire way back, heeling nicely to the carriage as we went.

When we got back to the mansion, Johanna picked Tilura up, and we all went inside together. This time, Sebastian went in first to let the servants know that Tilura was asleep.

“Welcome home,” they all said as quietly as they could as soon as we opened the door.

They’re still determined to say it all at once, huh?

Two of the maids—Gelda and a woman I didn’t recognize—approached Leo and Johanna.

"A-Allow us to relieve you," Gelda said.

"Woff."

Gelda took Cherie off Leo's back, and Johanna passed Tilura to the maid. They left to put them to bed. Honestly, I was surprised that neither of them had woken up the entire ride home.

They must've both been exhausted.

"Sebastian?" Claire called to him without even waiting until the two sleepers were out of sight. "I hate to bother you again, but..."

"Fret not, milady. You need but say the word."

Is this about that crooked merchant?

It had every bit as much to do with me as the others, but there wasn't anything I could do. All I could do was trust Sebastian would figure things out.

"Milady, dinner is ready for you," one of the servants told her.

"Oh, of course. Why don't we eat first, Takumi?"

"Okay. Can I put my things away first?"

"By all means."

With that, Leo and I stopped by our room to get ready for dinner. I made sure to take the sword off my belt and unpack my luggage. I didn't have much to put away, since we weren't on a shopping trip or anything, but I wanted to mind my manners, nonetheless.

When we arrived in the dining hall, I found that only Claire and Laila were waiting for us.

"Shall we begin, then?" Claire asked.

"Oh, is Tilura's still asleep?" I asked.

I didn't bother asking about Sebastian. I'd seen him hustling down the corridors on my way there, and he looked far too busy to join us.

"Both Lady Tilura and Cherie have been put to bed," Laila answered in Claire's stead.

Wait, so she saw them to bed, and still had time to help get things ready for dinner and make us tea? Is she teleporting around or something? We've been home like ten minutes, I marveled.

"We'll just let Tilura sleep," Claire said. "She had a rather busy day. She hasn't been in town in ages, after all."

"Yeah, I bet she's beat. She played with Leo and the orphans quite a bit, too."

There was also the chance that all of Eckenhart's training was starting to hit her now, too.

First studying, then training... Man, Tilura keeps busy.



"HOW do you think the first day of sales went, Takumi?"

Claire and I had just finished dinner, and we were relaxing over a pot of tea.

"Personally, I think we can just leave it to Kales from here on out. He seems to have a great sense for business, given how he used Leo to draw a crowd and sold the herbs out front. Besides, going by what Marontilana said, it looks like Ractos really needs medicine. I think we can count on the word spreading."

Leo did get overwhelmed, and I was a little slow to respond to that, but otherwise, it went pretty well.

Claire nodded. "I agree. While the shortages are certainly an issue, one that we'd best address as soon as possible, your medicine should be more appreciated because of it."

"Yeah... it looks like there just aren't enough herbs to go around."

Since most stores didn't have any stock to speak of, the only alternative was that crooked apothecary's diluted medicines. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I was that they were the ones responsible for the shortages.

I don't know how to feel about my herbs selling well because of that, though.

"Indeed. And I know Sebastian is looking into it, but the sooner we stop those weakened medicines from going around, the better," Claire said resolutely.

"Yeah. Coincidence or not, there is an epidemic going on. Curing everyone in

the orphanage was one thing, but there's no way we could handle the whole city that quickly," I said.

"Yes... You can't make enough capwort for the entire city." She sipped her tea. "Oh, I wish this whole mess blows over soon."

"Me too."

I thought back to the orphanage. It seemed like a nasty flu, but capwort could cure it almost immediately. The main issue was the shortage of capwort itself. If there was some way to prevent it altogether, that would be best.

"Wait... What if we could stop it from spreading?" I asked suddenly.

"Stop it?" She blinked in surprise. "How?"

Wait, isn't preventative medicine a thing here? Or maybe they haven't invented that yet. That would explain why we've been focusing just on curing it.

"Okay, let me tell you what we do back where I come from..." I began.

I explained to her how to prevent colds as best I could. There had to be a bacteria or something that carried the disease, after all. I wasn't a doctor or anything, but by the time I finished explaining, she seemed to understand.

"Interesting... Your old world had some fascinating ideas."

"Yeah. Basically, even just washing your hands regularly can prevent diseases from spreading. Regular baths also help. Oh, and living somewhere clean. That's a big one."

I didn't tell her anything revolutionary—even kids were told to wash their hands after coming home, after all—but it seemed to be a new concept to Claire. The only thing she seemed to recognize right off the bat was how important it was to keep your environment clean.

"I see." She nodded. "I'll let the servants know that they should follow the standards you described immediately. Oh, and Laila? Tell Sebastian about this, will you? We'd best make sure Ractos and all the nearby villages follow this as well."

"As you wish." Laila curtsied politely and left the room.

It was hard to imagine that everyone in town would follow Claire's guidelines, but with the duke's authority, most people should comply to some degree. With any luck, the epidemic's spread should at least slow down.

After that, Claire and I continued to chat about preventative measures while we enjoyed our tea.

I don't know how much this will help, but with any luck, we should be able to beat that flu.



"**ALL** right," I said with a stretch. "I took yesterday off, so I should get in some practice swings today."

"Wooo?" *Aren't you going to rest?* Leo seemed to be asking, her eyes wide.

"Sorry, girl. I really should get back to it today, and it couldn't hurt to exercise a little while I grow some capwort," I told her.

I stepped out into the garden, drew my short sword, and focused on swinging hard enough to make up for yesterday's missed practice. Tilura was still asleep, so I assumed she'd be taking the day off.

"Okay, now for the capwort..."

"Mr. Hirooka?" I could hear a tinge of worry in Laila's voice from where she was watching by the house. "I heard about what happened in town earlier. Perhaps you should rest?"

"Don't worry, I've got this. It's nothing," I assured her.

I got the feeling that capwort didn't use too much energy, so making a few more couldn't hurt.

"There, done. Could you hand this out to all the servants, Laila?"

"Understood. I take it this is part of the preventative medicine you discussed with milady?"

Kind of, but it's more like if someone does get sick, we'll be ready.

Almost everyone in the mansion had been in close contact with Tilura when she was sick, but nobody had any symptoms, so it was safe to assume nobody

had caught it. There was still a slight chance the virus was still dormant, though, so it couldn't hurt to be prepared. Her guess was close enough that I didn't bother correcting Laila, though.

"Okay, Leo. Wanna go back inside?"

"Rooo." She yawned and let out a big, lazy stretch before following me into the mansion.

I bet she's still tired... Things have been busy, even for her. It's getting pretty late, too.

As soon as we were back in our room, she immediately curled up beside my bed.

"G'night, girl. You did good today."

"Woff."

Listening to her drowsy reply, I crawled into bed myself and soon drifted off to sleep.



"M-MR. Hirooka? You have a guest!"

"A guest? For me?"

"Ruff."

Right in the middle of my afternoon training, Gelda came out into the garden and called for me.

Who could it be, though? I barely know anybody in this world.

Leo didn't seem surprised. Maybe she could smell who it was? I wiped off my sweat as I headed to the entrance hall.

"Hey, boss! Good to see you again!" my visitor shouted and waved.

"Wait... Nick? Is that you?"

"Yep, it's me!"

I almost didn't recognize him at first. After all, his mohawk had been shaved right off, and his head now shined in the sunlight.

I guess he's working at Kales's store now... Better to be bald than try to serve customers with a mohawk.

He was dressed in a simple, clean-looking jacket, the kind of clothes I saw all over town. He still didn't give off an especially good impression, but he at least passed for normal now.



That explains how Leo knew it was him, though. She knows his scent.

It was honestly a little surprising she could catch a whiff of him from so far away when there wasn't even any wind, but that was a mystery for another day.

"So what brings you way out here, Nick? Don't tell me Kales kicked you out?" I asked.

If that was the case, then I owed Kales an apology. I was the one who recommended Nick to his store, after all.

Nick shook his head. "Nah, there's no way I'd mess up that bad on the first day, boss. I'm here for the herbs."

"Herbs? Oh, right!"

Nick's main job was to transport herbs to and from Kales's store, after all. What with the ordeal at the orphanage and worrying about that fake apothecary, I'd totally forgotten about Nick. Sebastian didn't have time to come and handle Nick, either.

"What should I do now?" I mumbled.

"You don't have the herbs yet?" Nick asked.

"No, I have them. Wait here a minute."

I left him in the entrance hall, and after asking Gelda where Sebastian was, I went to talk to him about it. I found him in the butlers' offices, at the far end of the second-floor corridors.

"Sebastian?" I knocked on the door. "Can I talk with you?"

"Mr. Hirooka?" It was Sebastian's voice. "By all means, come in."

"Okay."

I opened the door to find it full of desks. Sebastian was seated at the far end of the room, at the biggest one.

I swear I've seen this exact same room in companies back in Japan.

"Is something amiss?" he asked.

“No, it’s just that Nick is here for the herbs. What should I do?”

“Ah, I see.” He stopped to think for a moment. “Come to think of it, I haven’t even handed you today’s order, have I? My sincerest apologies. It must have slipped my mind, what with this diluted medicine debacle.”

I knew it, he’s really busy. He wasn’t even at his usual post behind Claire during breakfast.

“Let me see... Ah, here it is. Now, it is a tad larger than yesterday’s order, but I trust there won’t be any issues?”

I looked at it. “Hmm... Nope, this should be fine. I could probably make even more without a problem.”

“Ah, good. I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Yep. Don’t push yourself too hard,” I joked

He let out a hearty chuckle. “Now, now. I know I’m not as young as I used to be. I shall be sure to pace myself.”

I had plenty of experience with overwork, and the last thing I wanted was for Sebastian to collapse like I did. From the way he was smiling, though, I could tell that he was more than fine; he was enjoying himself.

With that, I stopped by the entrance hall to ask Nick to wait a little longer before heading back out into the garden. I made sure not to get too close to where Tilura was training and began cultivating herbs.

Leo cocked her head to the side as she watched me work. “Wuff?”

“These are today’s herbs... Hey, Cherie! Don’t eat that!”

“*Whine...*” Cherie obediently stopped sniffing at the herbs I was growing, backing up with her ears flat and her tail drooping.

I don’t think she was actually going to eat it, but better safe than sorry.

“There sure are a lot of capwort orders, huh...” I muttered.

The capwort was the first thing to sell out yesterday, and just as I’d thought, the order was asking for even more of it.

I bet the disease is starting to really get around now. I hope it’s not too

widespread yet...

I picked and prepared all the herbs, and Laila helped me sort each by type. Since individually packing them would probably take a while, I decided to leave that to Kales. The order called for some herbs to be powdered, including the capwort, and I made sure not to mix anything up. Back when I'd dried the capwort that cured Tilura, I didn't even know how I did it, so naturally, I didn't fully process it. Now, though, I was thoroughly used to it.

"All right, that's about it. Thanks for your help, Laila," I said. "It was nice to have another set of hands."

She shook her head. "I'm glad I could be of assistance."

I took the herbs and headed toward the entrance hall. Along the way, I met Gelda, so I told her to direct Nick to the parlor and I'd meet him there.

"Thanks for waiting," I said as I walked in. "Here's the order."

Nick, however, was slowly spinning in place, trying to take in every detail. "Wow, boss, this place is real fancy!"

I know exactly how you feel.

It was a duke's villa, after all, and the sheer size and opulence were enough to make anyone stop and stare—especially since neither of us had any experience with nobility before.

"Try not to do anything too weird, okay? You can take the medicine and get back to Kales now."

"Yep! Leave it to me! I'll take this back to the manager if it kills me!"

"Thanks. Oh, and one more thing." I stopped him as he turned to leave.

"What's up, boss?"

I pulled a gold coin out of the pouch on my belt. "Here, this is your wage. There's a small advance here, of course. You're broke now, right?"

"Y-You sure, boss?"

"Of course, I'm sure. You can't live a decent life if you're broke. The sooner you're independent, the better," I told him.

His eyes began to water, and he gratefully bowed to me a few times. “Thanks a bunch, boss! B-But am I really worth a whole gold coin?”

He’s my employee, after all, so I need to take care of him. I can’t just let Kales handle everything for me.

I was glad that I’d asked Sebastian what the average wage was like in Ractos. According to him, most people made one or two gold coins per month.

“This job does require a lot of travel, after all,” I said.

I wanted his wage to reflect the work he put into traveling back and forth so often, so that gold piece was his two weeks’ wage. I planned to ask Kales about Nick’s work ethic later, and I could raise or lower his wage accordingly.

“Oh, and just to be clear, I want to see all of those herbs make it to Kales’s store okay,” I stressed.

“Don’t worry, boss, I’d never run off with the goods. I know just how scary you can be. ‘Sides, there’s no way I’d wanna get on the duke’s bad side.”

I remember hearing that defying a noble could even get you executed in this country. He never would’ve attacked me in the first place if he knew I had such close ties with House Libert.

Besides, I think he means he knows how scary Leo can be, not me. I decided once again to trust him, and I watched as he headed out the front door. *Worst-case scenario, I’ll just sic Leo on him.*

I headed back to the garden to continue my training, but on the way, I ran into Leo, Cherie, and Tilura.

“Takumi! Let’s eat lunch together!” Tilura called.

“Wait, is it that late already?” I asked.

“Ruff, ruff!”

“Arf, arf!”

Huh. Time really flew.

I was a little disappointed that I didn’t have enough time to get a little more practice in before lunch, but I could tell Tilura was hungry, and both fenrir

seemed determined to eat. With that, we all headed to the dining hall together.



“MILADY, Mr. Hirooka. I have found some information on that medicine peddler...on Yugard’s store, that is.”

Just as we were finishing dinner, Sebastian came in to give his report.

I guess Yugard must be the name of the guy behind it.

“Are you sure I should be listening to this?” I asked, just to be sure.

I’m not technically part of the Liberts, after all.

He nodded. “As it concerns the herbs, I believe you had best do so. There very well could be something you can do about it.”

I could see that even Claire was nodding in agreement.

“What can I do to help, though? I don’t see how Herb Cultivation would help here.”

“We will require you to make a stockpile of capwort, you see,” Sebastian said.

“More capwort?”

Don’t tell me the epidemic’s getting out of hand already.

“You see,” he continued, “it was no mere coincidence this Yugard fellow set up shop as the epidemic began to spread. It appears those who run it *knew* the epidemic would hit.”

“They knew? How?” I asked, eyebrows raised.

“According to a report I received earlier today, it seems as though the Yugard employees were, in fact, the ones responsible for buying out the stock of every other store in town. Not only that, but they also targeted capwort specifically.”

“They did? Uh-oh.”

“Uh-oh, indeed. As you well know, capwort provides near-instantaneous relief from the malady. Judging from that, we can assume they knew both what the illness was and its cure.”

They would only do that if they *knew* capwort worked.

“However,” Sebastian continued, “it is important to note that shortly after the outbreak, they purchased all other medicines they could find. That would make it harder for us to read their intentions and discern said cure.”

I remember hearing from Marontilana that they recommended capwort to her but watered it down specifically so that it wouldn’t work. All they had to do to earn her trust was imply they were operating under Claire’s authority, and they could get rich in no time.

“It was also at this point that demand for medicines and medicinal herbs increased exponentially. The Yugard store then began selling all that they had amassed. The general populace’s ignorance of medical matters worked to their total advantage. Capwort is not the only diluted medicine they sell, it seems,” Sebastian finished.

“That’s awful...”

“How dare they deceive my people like that!” Claire glowered. “They won’t get away with this.”

If most people didn’t know what medicine worked best on what illness, then they’d be more likely to buy a wide variety of things in hopes that one would work. It also would’ve been child’s play for Yugard’s employees to recommend “cures” they knew would have no effect.

“It’s a scam,” I said with a shake of my head. “This is all one big medical scam.”

Sebastian nodded. “Precisely. However, the Libert family is not in a position to immediately stop them.”

Claire’s eyes went wide. “We’re not? Why?”

“It would be possible in theory, but there would be some rather unfortunate repercussions.”

“Oh... You mean the noble who’s supposedly backing them,” Claire guessed.

Right, Nick mentioned something about that.

“Indeed, milady. I have information linking Yugard’s store with the count in the next domain over.”

“The count... You mean House Bastler,” Claire concluded.

“One and the same. Count Bastler himself is thought to be involved,” Sebastian said gravely.

So, he’s the guy responsible for all this?

I knew that Claire and Eckenhart were always aboveboard when it came to business, but evidently, Count Bastler didn’t play by the same rules.

“Who exactly is Count Bastler?” I asked.

“He is the ruler of the domain beside Duke Libert’s. I’m afraid that we cannot put an immediate stop to his business on the duke’s authority alone,” Sebastian explained.

Why is that, though? Shouldn’t the duke outrank the count? I guess there must be a lot more politics behind this than meets the eye.

Sebastian noticed the look on my face despite my not voicing my opinion. “As you no doubt have guessed, given the noble politics involved, we cannot confront the Yugard establishment directly.”

Can you stop reading my mind, Sebastian? Thanks.

Either way, though, I could tell this meant trouble.

“Don’t we have proof, though?” I wondered aloud. “If we know all this, then we should be able to do *something*, right?”

Sebastian shook his head. “Regrettably, most of our evidence is circumstantial at best. All we would be able to prove is that their medicine is diluted and is likely sourced from other stores in town. The individual responsible for Yugard’s purchases has unfortunately left town, and we have no clue as to their whereabouts.”

“Really? How do you know?”

“Oh, I have several old contacts scattered throughout town. They hear things, you know, and there are several reports of an individual who seems to be our mystery buyer.”

“But they’re gone now,” I said.

“Unfortunately, yes. Furthermore, as everyone who could attest to said individual’s guilt is a second-hand witness at best, such evidence cannot be called conclusive by any stretch.”

Yeah, that wouldn’t sound very convincing. If the buyer’s not in town anymore, then I guess that angle’s a dead end.

“Isn’t selling bad medicine enough of a reason to confront them, though?” I asked.

“We certainly could, but that would be a rather weak case,” Sebastian said. “Were it an independent store, it would likely be sufficient, but we mustn’t forget Count Bastler’s hand in this. Furthermore, if we were to show our hand now, they could well turn that knowledge against us.”

Claire sighed. “If only we could get more evidence.”

“Dang... This sucks.”

We talked a little more and decided to update Eckenhart on the situation before breaking up our meeting. After that, Tilura and I headed back out into the garden to do some more training. Tilura seemed just fine to continue, but I just couldn’t quite put my heart into it.

How am I supposed to focus on anything else if there’s a store out there that’s profiting from innocent people’s suffering?

“Ruff! Bark, bark!” Leo suddenly snapped me out of my daze.

“O-Oh... Sorry, girl. Thanks.”

Swinging a sword around without paying attention was a great way to hurt myself. I gave Leo a thank-you pat on the flank, then turned my full attention to training with Tilura.

“Wuff.” Leo seemed relieved that I was paying attention again.

Leo really likes taking care of me, huh?

Putting aside my hatred of the Yugard store, I focused on the task at hand.

I guess I’ll just have to hope Eckenhart has a solution for all of this.



SEVERAL days later, after I'd just finished training in the back garden, Claire and one of the maids came out. I could tell from the look on their faces that something was wrong.

"Takumi, have you seen Cherie anywhere?" Claire asked.

"Cherie?" I thought for a moment. "Sorry, I don't think I've seen her out here. What about you, Leo?"

She shook her head. "Uwoo-woo."

"Oh, okay." I turned back to Claire. "Leo hasn't seen her, either. She's not with Tilura?"

Claire shook her head. "I asked her, but she says she hasn't seen Cherie since she started studying."

Wait, does that mean Cherie's missing?

I hadn't seen her since I started studying cultivating herbs in the garden right after breakfast, and Leo would've noticed her coming out. I was sure she must've been with Tilura.

"You can't find Cherie, then?" I asked.

Claire nodded solemnly. "Normally, if she isn't with Miss Leo or Tilura, she comes as soon as I call her. Though I suppose she's never been out of my sight at times like that."

"Huh... I wonder where she went? Do you think she left the mansion?"

The maid shook her head. "I checked while milady was talking to Lady Tilura. There's no sign she's left the grounds."

"Oh, okay."

At least she's somewhere around here.

The mansion was surrounded by a high wall on all sides, and Phillip and the other guards were always at the only gate. She would have a hard time escaping.

As an aside, Claire had escaped to go to the woods by slipping out during the changing of the guard. After that, they apparently changed their procedures so

that the gate was never left unattended, even for a moment.

“Wuff!” Leo gently tugged on my sleeve with her giant mouth.

“Hm? What is it, Leo?”

“Ruff! Roo-roo, wooooo!” She pointed at the maid accompanying Claire with a massive forepaw.

“Wait, really? Are you sure?”

“What did Miss Leo say?” Claire asked.

The maid’s eyes grew wide with worry. “Did she just point at me? I hope I didn’t offend her.”

According to Leo, that maid is the reason Cherie’s missing. Er, she says there’s a chance, at least. She also says it’s not really the maid’s fault, so I’d better tell her that right away.

“Uh... How do I put this?” I scratched my head. “Leo thinks it’s because you seem a little scary. Cherie might be hiding because she doesn’t want you to yell at her. Does any of that make sense?”

The maid did seem to be in a bit of a bad mood, and she had her eyes narrowed slightly as though she was annoyed.

I definitely don’t want to see her mad... Maybe Cherie’s afraid of getting yelled at?

“O-Oh.” The maid’s head drooped. “I’m terribly sorry... You see, I was doing the laundry, and...”

“Cherie climbed into the clean clothes and made a mess of them,” Claire cut in. “We’ve been trying to find her so that we can encourage her not to do that again.”

I nodded. “Ah, that explains it.”

“Woof!” Leo puffed out her chest with pride.

“That’s right, girl, you guessed it. Good job!” I gave her a congratulatory scratch behind the ears.

“Wooooo!”

So Cherie's a wanted laundry-dirtier on the run, huh?

Thinking back on it, whenever Leo made a mess back in our apartment in Japan, she'd always huddle up in the corner and try to hide. She'd sullenly look up at me with that sad, pitiful look in her eyes, and I could never stay angry at her after that.

Man, that takes me back.

"What do you think we should do, then?" Claire asked. "I'm starting to feel sorry for her, but I can't let this go unpunished. Oh, but that's assuming we can find her..."

I'm not surprised she's so worried. This has never happened before.

"Hmm... I'm not sure."

"Woof, wuff." Don't worry. She'll come out for dinner.

"Well, yeah, but we can't wait that long," I told Leo.

I don't want her huddled up and afraid until then.

"Does Cherie mess with the laundry often?" I asked the maid.

"She does. I often find her nuzzling milady's clothes and playing with them."

"I often watch her to make sure she doesn't damage them," Claire added. "Today, however, she was especially naughty. She must not be playing enough lately."

"She had burrowed right into the pile," the maid explained. "Not only that, but I found her putting them in her mouth, of all things." The thought of it caused a scowl to creep back onto her face.

Claire nodded. "You should've seen the state of them. They were sopping."

Oh boy. Yeah, I'd be pretty ticked off by that, too. There are no washing machines in this world, either, so it must be a big pain to clean them again. Wait, I never did properly thank the maids for doing my laundry, did I?

"But clean clothes, huh..." I looked at Leo.

"Ruff?" She tilted her head in confusion.

I remember one time when Leo was just a pup, I had just taken in the laundry from where it was drying on the balcony. I only looked away for a second, but it was enough for Leo to do the same thing Cherie had. I didn't get too angry back then—mostly because she didn't get the clothes too dirty, and putting them through the wash again wasn't too much trouble.

I did some research later, and it turned out that dogs like to put their scents on things close to them, especially if they smell like detergent or other unpleasant things. Leo did it a few more times, so I made sure to scold her out of it, but I knew she was just trying to overwrite the detergent smell, so I didn't hold it against her.

Maybe that's why Cherie was rooting through the laundry?

Cherie might just have been putting her smell on the clothes, and she didn't do it to cause problems or play around. Of course, she wasn't technically a dog, but it'd make sense to me if fenrir did similar things—they were canines, after all.

"Cherie probably wasn't trying to make a mess on purpose," I said.

"Is that so?"

"This is just a guess, but she probably just wanted to get rid of the soap smell on your clothes. Leo's done the exact same thing before."

"She has?"

We couldn't know for sure unless we asked Cherie directly, of course, but it was a reasonable assumption.

"Hruff!" Leo grumpily turned away from me.

"Haha, don't worry. I'm not angry at you anymore." I gave her a reassuring pat.

"Wuff."

It was years ago, and she's been good as gold most of the time since then.

Claire still seemed worried. "If Cherie didn't mean anything untoward by it, then what should I do? I can't just let her keep doing this, can I?"

“Oh, you should definitely train her out of it. On that front, she’s just like a human being. If she’s doing something bad, scold her, and if she’s doing something good, praise her. It’s easy, really.”

It would be especially easy since Cherie could understand everything we said without a problem. Even a monster could learn the difference between right and wrong. This was Cherie’s first time living among humans, after all, so both sides had a lot of adjusting to do. The worst thing we could do now would be to get too angry with her. If we scolded her too much, she’d learn that we were scary and unsafe to be around, not that what she did was wrong.

I know Claire wouldn’t be too harsh on Cherie, but I’m admittedly a little bit worried about the maid. Fortunately, she seemed to understand now that Cherie meant no harm, and she seemed a little more relaxed than before. *That’s good, and a lot more useful than just yelling.*

“Anyhow, we’d better find Cherie first... Any ideas, Leo?” I asked my partner.

Leo nodded confidently. “Woof!”

“Great. Take us to her, then.”

“Thank you for helping us, Miss Leo.” Claire bowed gratefully to her, and the maid followed suit.

Leo could probably find Cherie by sniffing her out, or even detecting her presence.

“Hnnngh... *Sniff sniff...*” She stuck her nose in the air and took a few deep sniffs. “RUFF!”

“Wow, found her already?” I asked her. She nodded.

“Let’s go, then,” Claire said.

“As you will, milady.”

Leo stood up and started walking toward the mansion, while Claire, the maid, and I followed behind.



BEFORE long, Leo had taken us to the kitchen, where Helena was preparing

dinner. The tantalizing aroma of cooking food wafted through the open doors.

I shot Leo a suspicious look. "It's not dinnertime yet, Leo."

She shook her head. "Bark! Woo-woo, ruff."

Oh. Sorry I ever doubted you. I guess you don't always follow your appetite, huh?

We walked right past the kitchen, proceeding down the corridor a short way before stopping in front of a different room.

"Ruff!" *She's in here!*

"Is this it, then?"

"Ruff, ruff!"

"All right. But wait, why in here?"

Inside, I could see a number of maids bustling to and fro, carrying all kinds of sheets and dirty clothes.

This is the laundry room, isn't it? Did the culprit return to the scene of the crime? I wondered.

"Leo says Cherie's definitely in here," I said to Claire and the maid. "I don't see any sign of her, though."

Claire poked her head in and looked around. "Neither do I."

Cherie might be only a puppy, but she was still as big as a medium-sized dog. There weren't even any large piles of clothes left lying around, so she couldn't be hiding.

"Are you sure she's in here?" the maid asked Leo.

"RUUFFFF!" *How rude!* she seemed to be saying.

"O-Oh, my apologies! I didn't mean to doubt you!"

I don't blame her, though. I'm just as confused as she is. Try not to get too angry at us, girl.

"...Hruff." Leo let out a sigh before plodding into the room and approaching a maid who was going through sheets brought in from outside.

“H-Hey, wait, Leo! Stop!” I called after her.

The maid was baffled. “I-Is everything all right, Miss— Ah?!”

Leo suddenly stuck her nose under her skirt and flipped the hem of it up.

Wh-Whoa! What?!

I quickly looked away, mortified, but what I heard next came as an even greater surprise.

“Cherie!” Claire shouted. “What do you think you’re doing under there?!”

“Whine...”

I peeked back just in time to see Cherie crawl out resignedly. She sat down just outside her hiding place, ears drooping and eyes wide with guilt.



“**YOU** can’t keep getting the sheets dirty, Cherie. Do you understand?”

“Whimper”

Not wanting to get in the way of the laundry, Claire waited until we had moved to the parlor to scold Cherie. The maid who had helped us look stayed behind in the laundry room to help. Apparently, she didn’t want to risk getting too angry at Cherie, so she left the scolding to Claire and me.

I chuckled nervously. “It looks like Cherie’s feeling pretty bad about it.”

“Arf!” She seemed to realize I was lending her a helping hand.

This is going well... I think.

“What were you even doing, hiding in a place like that?” Claire pressed. “You’re always either with Tilura, Miss Leo, or me, so what made today so different?”

“Arf? *Whine*, arph!”



Cherie was never forbidden from going into the laundry room as far as I knew, but it was a little odd that she'd go there alone today. I doubted that anyone took her there, and I couldn't think of anything she'd be that interested in.

Cherie cocked her head to the side for a moment before yipping out her reply, which Leo fortunately interpreted for us. She had caught a whiff of dinner and was trying to figure out where the smell was coming from when she found the room full of maids. They didn't want to play with her, though, and they told her to go find Claire, but she found something there that smelled too good to ignore.

It's oddly like Cherie to get distracted and forget about the smell of food altogether.

"And that's when you found the clean clothes?" Claire asked.

"Arf!"

"Woo-woo-woo, woof, ruff. Wuff?"

"Really? Huh... I never would've guessed," I said.

"What is it, Takumi?" Claire asked me.

"No, it's just...that wasn't the answer I was expecting. Sorry."

It turned out I was right about the smell of the laundry after all, but according to Leo, I got one crucial detail wrong. Cherie had crawled into the clothes because she thought they smelled *good*, not because she was trying to smother the bad smell. Since the clothes were sun-dried, it was no wonder she liked the smell.

Come to think of it, they had a big barrel in that room for washing clothes, but there weren't any clotheslines. They must've been drying them just outside, past that door I saw. I never saw that place from the garden because it's likely secluded for privacy reasons.

"Don't apologize, Takumi," Claire said. "It's all thanks to you and Leo that we found Cherie so quickly. I'm not upset, but I must admit that I'm confused. Sorry, sweetie." She scooped Cherie up in her arms and gave her a loving stroke.

“Arf?! Arf, arf!” She nuzzled Claire’s face.

“Hehe, I think she just complimented me.”

“Haha, she seems sorry, so I bet she was telling you there’s no reason to apologize,” I said.

“Ruff, ruff!” Leo agreed.

“Thank you, Cherie. But from now on, no more crawling into clean clothes, okay? You’ve caused a lot of problems for the maids.”

“*Whine ...Arf?*” She gave Claire a doleful look.

According to Leo, Cherie was really sorry about the trouble she caused, and she wouldn’t do it again, but she’d really miss the sunny smell of the fresh laundry.

Claire sighed and smiled. “Oh, fine.”

It was decided that Cherie needed a special little bed of her own that the maids would wash and dry with all the other clothes. She could get that as dirty as she wanted to.

I guess things won’t be much different from when she was nuzzling Claire’s clothes, huh?

It was unfortunate that the maids had some extra work to do now, but at least it enabled Claire and Cherie to come to an understanding. Unlike Leo when she was just a little Maltese, there wasn’t any scolding needed.

I’m just glad this was an easier fix than the sausage fiasco when we tried teaching her restraint.



SEVERAL days passed after the laundry incident without much happening. Sebastian still couldn’t find any concrete evidence against the Yugard store, and we still hadn’t received word back from Eckenhart. There wasn’t anything for me to do but train with Tilura, although Tilura herself had her studies as well.

“Maybe I should start studying, too?” I wondered.

I still didn’t know much about this world, so it couldn’t hurt to study with

Tilura, but I generally spent all my time on training and Herb Cultivation instead.

I've gotta study sooner or later, though.

I was also growing herbs for Kales's store, of course, but their biggest order was always capwort. Another employee had come with Nick when he came to pick up the herbs this time, and I learned of Nick's work ethic from her.

"So Nick's working hard?" I asked.

"Oh, definitely." She chuckled. "He still has a lot to learn, but he works harder than any of us. Recently he's been going on and on about how he can't afford to ruin your good name."

I still don't know how to feel about his extreme loyalty toward me, but at least he's working now.

With any luck, Kales's store would help undermine Yugard's chokehold on the medicine scene. Claire also had the sanitary measures I told her about put on fliers and spread across town. It was hard to tell how many people would take the fliers seriously, but if it helped even a few people avoid illness, it was worth it.

"Takumi?" Claire addressed me as we ate breakfast. "Don't forget you're going to the orphanage today."

"Oh, right! I guess it's been a week already."

Today was the day Milicia would be joining us at the mansion. Since she probably had a lot of luggage, we decided to go into town to pick her up. It'd likely be too much for her to handle on her own.

"Unfortunately, I won't be able to accompany you," Claire continued. "I've business to discuss with Sebastian."

"Don't worry, I'll give Marontilana your regards," I said.

"Please do."

I bet Claire and Sebastian are going to talk about more Yugard countermeasures... Even if we hear nothing from Eckenhart, there's got to be something they can do.

With that, Leo and I went to the entrance hall and got ready to leave.

“C’mon, Leo, let’s go.”

“Woof!”

“Awf?” Cherie raised her head inquisitively from where she was perched on Leo’s back.

“You wanna come too, Cherie?” I asked her.

Cherie really likes her little spot up there, huh?

“Arf! Awf, awrf!”

“Ruff, ruff!”

I still couldn’t understand Cherie, but Leo interpreted for me. It sounded like Cherie wanted to get more used to people.

“So you’re training yourself, huh? Shouldn’t you stick with Claire or Tilura, though?”

“Arf. Yip-yip!”

“Ruff. Woo-woo-roo.” *She says it seems more fun to go with you, or something like that.*

We weren’t going into Ractos to have fun, but a trip into town *did* sound more interesting than sitting with Claire or Tilura the whole time.

“All right, you can come—but only if you behave.”

“Arf!”

“Ruff.”

After seeing Cherie nod in agreement, the three of us left the mansion together. Outside, I found Laila and a butler waiting with a carriage.

“Allow us to accompany you,” Laila said with a curtsy.

“Oh, okay. Thanks, both of you.”

The butler nodded. “Of course.”

The butler climbed into the coachman’s seat, and Laila and I took our seats

inside.

I bet Laila's coming along since we'll be picking up Milicia's things. She'd probably feel more comfortable with a woman there to help.

"Let us be underway," came the butler's voice, and with that, we were off.

"Ruff!"

"Arf, arf!"

Both Leo and Cherie seemed excited to be finally underway as well.

Not long after we'd left, though, I remembered something. "Oh, dang."

"Is something the matter?" Laila asked.

"No, it's just that I haven't handed today's herbs off to Nick yet."

He typically arrived at noon, or a little earlier. Given the travel time needed, we'd probably reach town at about that time. I'd made the herbs the night before, but since we'd left so soon after breakfast, he was probably still on the way.

"We can stop by Kales's store on the way," Laila reassured me. "I took the liberty of bringing today's herbs with us."

I blinked in surprise. "You did? Thank you."

I was hoping that somebody would find the herbs and make sure they got to Nick, but Laila was a step ahead of me.

Professional maids really are amazing.



"I shall make haste to the orphanage, then," the butler announced.

"Great. Laila and I will meet you there."

Laila nodded. "Of course."

After arriving in town, we split up. Laila and I headed toward Kales's store. Since we hadn't run into Nick on the road into town, he probably hadn't left yet, but it'd be better for both of us if we arrived before he left.

When we arrived at the store, we found Kales getting the storefront ready.

"Hello, Kales," I greeted.

"My word!" He turned around and started with surprise. "If it isn't Mr. Hirooka! What brings you here today, sir?"

"We had some business in town, so I thought I'd drop off today's order myself."

"Why, how very considerate of you! Your herbs have been selling extraordinarily well, you know. They practically sell themselves!" He grinned as I handed him the bag of herbs.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised, since they're the only place selling quality medicine around here... Still, it's nice to know something I make is appreciated.

As we were chatting, Nick came out of the store. He did a double-take as soon as he saw me. "Boss? What're you doing way out here? I was just about to come see you."

"Oh, Nick. Laila and I are in town on business, so we delivered today's herbs ourselves." I turned back to Kales. "By the way, how has Nick been doing lately? He's not giving you any trouble, is he? I heard he's working hard."

Hearing from the manager himself should give me a better idea of how he was doing overall.

"I've been pleasantly surprised with his work ethic, to be honest," Kales said. "He may be only just starting out, but I can hardly believe he was a coarse old ruffian a week ago."

"A-Aw, shucks," Nick said as he bashfully scratched his head.

Huh. He's really doing that well?

Kales's face scrunched up a little. "There is one thing I believe he needs a little... no, a lot of work on."

"Really? I hope he hasn't been causing trouble for you."

"You see, his customer service skills leave much to be desired. Just the other day, he treated one of our customers a tad disrespectfully."

"Oh, c'mon." Nick rolled his eyes. "That was the hag's own fault, findin'

imaginary problems with the boss's herbs."

"Yeah, I think I get it." I turned to Nick. "That's no reason to treat any customer rudely, though."

I could imagine he must've been irritated to hear those kinds of complaints, but he couldn't just mistreat people because they complained. The other customers would see his attitude, and the bad word would no doubt spread. Given his recent history of highway robbery, though, it wasn't too surprising he had to work on his manners.

"Mr. Hirooka?" Laila softly cleared her throat behind me. "We'd best be going."

"Oh, right. Sorry." I turned back to face Kales. "Can I leave Nick to you, then?"

"Of course you can! Don't worry, I'll beat the dos and don'ts of retail into him in no time."

Nick paled slightly. "Y-You're not really gonna beat me...right?"

"I'll see you two later then," I said, smiling.

"Of course. Thank you once again for taking the time to deliver the herbs."

"See you later, boss."

Leaving Nick to Kales, we headed toward the orphanage where Milicia was waiting.



AFTER arriving at the orphanage, I approached the woman working outside. I recognized her as the same nun we'd seen sweeping out front the last time we came.

"Excuse me? We're here for Milicia," I said.

"Oh, Mr. Hirooka! Thank you so much for coming. Milicia's been beside herself with anticipation, you know." Chuckling, the nun led us to a small meeting room inside. There, we found Marontilana and Milicia waiting for us.

"Pardon us, Marontilana," the nun said. "They've arrived."

"Why, welcome back, Mr. Hirooka."

“Master! Thank you soooo much!” Milicia ran right up to me, beaming.

I can tell she’s been waiting for this.

“Ready to go?” I asked her.

“Yes! I’ve gotten all my things together!”

“Take care of her, now,” Marontilana said.

I nodded firmly. “Don’t worry, I promise I will.”

Milicia and Laila picked up some of the luggage that was piled along one of the walls and started carrying it out of the room. I grabbed the last bag, and as Marontilana bowed deeply, I followed them.

“Is this everything?” I asked Milicia as we walked.

“Yes. I don’t have very many things, you see.”

We walked outside. Since the villa had all the furniture she’d need, it seemed like most of Milicia’s luggage were clothes and other small affects. She claimed that she didn’t have much, but there was still a healthy number of bags for a young girl, even if it wasn’t very heavy.

“All right. Do you want to head straight to the mansion, then?” I asked.

Laila nodded. “That might be for the best.”

“Oh, yes! Let’s go!”

As we were walking out the gate, a group of orphans came out to see us off. I spotted Marontilana among them, a complicated mix of joy and sadness on her face.

“Bye-bye, Milicia!” they all called out.

“Oh...” Milicia stopped for a moment. I could tell she was trying hard to keep her tears in. Finally, she worked up the strength to wave. “Headmistress, everyone... Take care of yourselves!”

As we left, Leo gave Milicia a consoling nuzzle. “Wuff.”

She chuckled, expression brightening a little. “Thank you, Miss Leo.”

Even though her arms were full of bags, she leaned in and rubbed her face in

Leo's plush pelt.

The villa's not too far from Ractos, but this is her home. I bet it's a lot harder for her to leave than she's letting on.

"Are you okay, Milicia?" I asked.

"Y-Yes... I'll be fine."

"Woooo?" Leo's voice was full of worry.

"Hehe... You're so kind, Miss Leo." She looked up a little and smiled.

She's putting on a brave face now, but I can tell she'll be all right.



"**THANK** you all for your patience," the butler said as he finished loading Milicia's bags into the carriage.

I could tell that Milicia herself was a little uncertain about getting in the carriage.

"Milicia?"

"What is it, Master?"

"How would you like to ride to the mansion on Leo's back?"

Her eyes grew wide. "O-On Miss Leo? Can I really?!"

"Of course. Right, girl?"

"Woof!" *Leave it to me!* Leo turned around, crouching down low enough that Milicia could climb aboard.

"A-Are you sure it's safe?"

"Leo won't let you fall off, I promise. Go on." I gave her a little push forward, and she climbed onto Leo's back.

"Woo-woo!" Leo started wagging excitedly.

"Arf, arf!" Cherie barked out a welcome.

"It's so soft and warm up here... And, um, you're Cherie?"

"Arf!"

Cherie jumped right into Milicia's arms. After making sure neither of them was about to fall off, I boarded the carriage and sat beside Laila.

Laila chuckled at me. "You're quite the gentle soul."

"Really? I just thought Leo could use the exercise."

"You thought Milicia looked lonely, didn't you?"

Oof, looks like the jig is up. This wouldn't be so awkward if we weren't crammed in here together...

I looked away. "Sh-She has to say goodbye to everyone and everything she knows, right? That can be hard."

I could faintly hear her giggle. "Both gentle and sweet, I see."

Despite how much she tried to deny it, I knew how miserable Milicia had to feel right now. Coming to this world wasn't a big deal for me, since Leo was the only person I'd miss anyways, but I remember how it felt to leave my uncle's house and start living alone when I was in high school. She was probably every bit as lonely as I'd felt back then.

"Let us depart," the butler announced.

With a flick of the reins, the carriage was in motion, and Leo started trotting along beside us. As we passed through the city gates, I looked out the window at Milicia to make sure she was stable up there.

I knew it. She's every bit as lonely as I feared.



"THANK you so much for the ride, Miss Leo!"

"Ruff!"

"How was the ride on Leo?" I asked Milicia.

"It was great! Not like riding in a carriage at all. My butt doesn't hurt at all now!"

I bet not, with all of Leo's fluff there. Nothing like the bumpy ride in the carriage... I wish these things had better suspension.

We had just arrived back at the mansion, and a few servants had come out to help us with Milicia's bags.

"Allow us to handle her luggage," one of them said with a bow.

"Thanks." I nodded.

"Oh, let me help!" Milicia said. "They're my things, after all!"

"You can go inside," Laila insisted as she began unpacking Milicia's bags. "From tomorrow, you'll be a servant like the rest of us, but today, you're a guest."

"O-Oh. Okay."

I guess that makes sense. It'll give her a chance to get used to this place, after all.

"Let's go inside, then," I offered.

"Okay." She swallowed hard. "The duke's mansion... I'm starting to feel nervous."

"I wouldn't worry if I were you. Everyone here is really nice." I smiled at her as we stepped through the front doors.

"Welcome home, Mr. Hirooka! Welcome, Miss Milicia!" All the servants called out to us at once.

Milicia flinched. "Eep!"

I chuckled. "There's no need to be so scared. That's just the servants' way of saying hello."

I bet it was quite the jump scare, though, figuring how nervous she is already. If she's a "Miss," then I guess she really is guest for a day.

A few of the servants approached Milicia out of the group.

"How have you been, Milicia? I haven't seen you in forever!"

"To think that even little Milicia is here... I must be getting old..."

"So you're gonna be Mr. Hirooka's apprentice, huh? You're sure hitting the big-time!"

She looked up at them in awe. She seemed to recognize them. “Y-You guys...”

Come to think of it, Claire did mention that a few of the servants came from the orphanage. Hopefully, Milicia won't feel quite so alone now.

As I watched them, Claire and Sebastian came down the stairs to greet us.

Claire smiled warmly at me. “Glad to see you back so soon.”

“Welcome home, Mr. Hirooka,” Sebastian said with a bow.

“Thanks. It's good to be home.”

Milicia noticed them, and instantly she tensed up again. She bowed as naturally as she could. “O-Oh! Um, thank you for having me, Lady Claire.”

“Welcome, Milicia. It's a pleasure to have you.”

“Um, it's a *p-pweasure* to b-be here!” she sputtered.

After that, Milicia was shown to her room for the night by a group of her old friends from the orphanage. I even spotted Laila and Gelda among them.

Oh, that's right. They're from the orphanage, too.

Claire, Sebastian, and I headed to the dining hall for a late lunch. Between their lengthy conversation and my trip into town, it was already midafternoon. Tilura, it seemed, had already finished her lunch and was training in the garden.

“Thank you for going all the way into town to pick up Milicia,” Claire said.

“It was nothing. Her bags weren't that heavy or anything. Besides, I got a chance to take Kales today's herbs,” I said.

“Ah, I see.” Sebastian mused. “That would explain why I didn't see Nick today.”

I nodded. “Laila thought to take the herbs with us into town.”

I'd better finish lunch quick and meet up with Tilura, though. I've got a lot of training to do. Or wait, maybe I should run a few more experiments with Herb Cultivation first?

“By the way, Mr. Hirooka,” Sebastian suddenly cut into my thoughts. “I hope you don't mind, but I took the liberty of looking into Nick's past.”

“Nick’s? Why?”

I was surprised that he had the time to do that, given how much trouble Yugard was giving him. Still, it made sense to run a background check on Nick, just in case. If he turned out to be trouble and word got out that he was almost directly employed by the duke’s own family, it could be a PR disaster. It’d be just as bad if any past victims of his showed up.

“My investigation, however, revealed nothing that we were not already aware of. His worst offense by far was assaulting you.”

“Really?”

“Indeed. His attempt to rob milady was certainly not his first, though it seems he was not the instigator of said robbery. He was simply playing along with a comrade’s plan.”

“So, do you know exactly how much trouble he caused in the past?” I asked.

“Most notably, he has four counts of threats and extortion against him, mainly against merchants, including his assault on you and his ill-fated attempt on the Yugard store. If you were to count the attempted highway robbery, that would be five counts overall.”

“Okay... So did he do any damage to those two other merchants’ stores or anything?”

“As he acted alone in both cases, the shopkeepers were able to ward him off without difficulty. No damages are reported in either case.”

“Wait, none? At all?” I asked, surprised.

I thought I got lucky when I fought him off with barely any training, but...wow. I’d have thought his mohawk and general disposition would’ve been able to get him something.

“No harm at all,” Sebastian confirmed. “Apparently, his appearance when we first met him was a recent change in and of itself. I believe he only dressed like that to seem more threatening.”

A true punk makeover, then. I guess it worked.

“It seems as though even his change in attire was due to his meeting a certain

individual, however,” Sebastian said gravely.

“Who?”

“That man, as it happens, is a villain through and through. He and his men brought Nick into their fold as their lackey.”

So Nick tried to go bad, but kept failing on his own. He attracted the attention of some real bad guys, though... Sounds like something that could happen with the yakuza back in Japan.

“Now, in light of the information he provided us on the Yugard operation, and the lack of damages accrued, I am prepared to personally apologize to the stores he wronged and ask a full pardon from the guards on his behalf,” Sebastian said.

“You’d really do that for him? Thank you.”

“No, I assure you, this is the least I could do.”

I shook my head. “You let me take him in, not knowing if it’d hurt the Liberts’ reputation. Honestly, I really appreciate that. Thank you.”

“W-Well... I suppose it was only natural.”

Sebastian didn’t just run a background check on him, it seemed as though he genuinely accepted Nick now.

Still, it’d be nice if Nick could go and apologize himself.

Sebastian cleared his throat, a hint of awkwardness in his voice. “Nick has habitually struggled to even keep himself fed, so I’ll admit I was sympathetic to that. However, I’ll thank you to exercise more caution in the future. While forgiveness can be a beautiful thing, you risk more than yourself with such leniency.”

I nodded. “I understand.”

So, Nick was starving, huh? I bet he only did all those things so he could eat. It still doesn’t make him a saint, but I can understand that.

I finished lunch, but just as I was about to head out into the garden, Milicia walked in.

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, Milicia. How do you like the mansion so far?” I asked.

She smiled a little. “Well, it’s nice that there are so many people I know here. My room looks pretty, too.” She turned and bowed to Claire. “Thank you so much for your generosity.”

“You’re welcome,” Claire smiled.

I bet the servants gave her the full greeting specifically so they could reassure her like that.

Milicia turned back to me. “So what are you going to do now, Master?”

“Me? I was just about to go do some sword practice in the garden.”

“Sword practice...” She deflated a little. “When are you going to study medicine?”

Right, I’m supposed to teach her... Er, learn together with her, I guess. That’s the whole reason she’s here.

“How about we study after I get in a few practice swings in, then? Let’s say...in one hour?”

“Okay! Sounds good!”

With that, I headed out into the garden to meet up with Tilura. I found her swinging her sword, covered in sweat and with a fierce look of determination on her face.

I’d better not get left behind. Herb Cultivation, sword training, studying medicine... I’ve got a lot on my plate, but if I put as much effort into it as Tilura is, it’ll all work out fine.



“OKAY, I guess that’s enough training for today.”

Tilura stopped her swinging. “You’re done already, Takumi?”

An hour had passed, and it was time I made good on my promise to Milicia. I still hadn’t filled my daily training quota, but I’d have time for that in the evening.

“I’ve got some studying to do now. How about you?” I asked.

I could see the interest immediately leave her face, and she returned her attention to her practice swings. “I’m gonna train more!”

I resisted the urge to laugh before heading back toward the mansion, making sure to wipe off my sweat before entering. Leo was at my heels, but Cherie seemed content to stick with Tilura.

Looks like she’s as interested in studying as Tilura is.

As I entered the dining hall, I saw Milicia and Laila chatting. They seemed to be getting along well already.

“Thanks for waiting, Milicia,” I said.

“There you are, Master! I’m ready when you are.”

“So, uh, studying medicine. How do you think we should start?”

Milicia’s expression darkened a little. “Oh... So you don’t have anything planned.”

Leo shook her head. “Hruff-ruff.”

How should I know how to start when I barely know anything myself? Do we memorize different herbs? Or maybe we should look into compounding right away? Or wait, maybe we should start with common illnesses? I honestly have no clue.

I could see Milicia’s hopes fall with every passing second, and I could feel all my authority as her teacher slip away—not that I had any real authority, to begin with.

“If only Sebastian were here... I bet he could teach us all sorts of stuff.”

“If I may,” Laila cut in, “Sebastian left this with me.”

“He what?”

Laila held out a thick hardcover book. On its cover were the words *Introduction to Medicine: The Apothecarial Fundamentals* in this world’s language.

“Huh... I didn’t know he even had books like this,” I remarked.

Laila nodded. "I was instructed to give this to you if you seemed at a loss."

"Oh, okay. Thank you."

He'd probably guessed that I wouldn't know how to get started.

I'm actually a little freaked out that he could see this far ahead, what with everything else he has on his plate. I'll have to thank him later.

"How about we read through this book together, Milicia?" I suggested.

"Okay!"

"Please remember that Milicia has had a busy day already," Laila reminded me. "Try not to overwhelm her."

Milicia shook her head. "Don't worry! I can still study hard!"

Laila has a point, though. This is a new place, and she just had to say goodbye to everyone at the orphanage. She's probably tired from carrying her bags and all that traveling, too. I'll make sure today's fairly light and easy.

"Where should we study, though?" I wondered aloud. "Laila, can we use the parlor?"

"Of course."

"Great. We'll do it there, then. Let's go, Milicia."

"Okay!"

"Woof!"

Wow, Leo sounds just as excited as Milicia. Don't tell me she wants to study medicine, too?

With that, the four of us headed right there. It had also occurred to me to study in my room, but since I only had one chair there, one of us would've had to stand.

When we arrived, Laila handed me a few loose-leaf sheets of parchment and a writing quill.

"Please make use of these."

"Thanks."

“Thank you!”

We sat down side-by-side, opening the book between us. Leo sat right behind us, leaning over our heads so that she could get a good look as well.

Huh... I guess she really does want to study with us.

“Okay... I think I get it,” I said.

“Mm... This is hard...” Milicia said.

We made notes as we read, summarizing all the important points.

“Um, Master? Can you explain this part to me?”

“Of course. Let’s see...”

Every once in a while, Milicia would ask for clarification, and we studied like that for some time. I noticed that as I explained, Leo would nod understandingly behind us, as if it all made perfect sense to her.

“After all this reading, I kind of want to try it out with some real herbs,” I muttered.

Milicia looked up at me in anticipation. “Are you going to use your power?”

“Well, I’d like to, but look at this passage here.”

I pointed out a sentence.

Milicia started to read it aloud. “Um... ‘Compounding out of curiosity alone is a dangerous endeavor. Suppress the urge to experiment until your understanding of the topic is complete.’”

“See? We probably shouldn’t, then.”

“That’s too bad... I really wanted to see your Gift again.”

If we started just mixing herbs at random, though, we could easily wind up with all sorts of unpredictable side effects. We might end up making something deeply harmful, and the best-case scenario would still be a waste of reagents.

“You want to see my Gift that bad, huh?”

“Of course! It’s practically a miracle!” Her eyes sparkled with excitement. “How often do you get to witness a miracle?!”

It's not that exciting, is it? Although I guess it is kind of unusual...

"How about I show you tomorrow?" I suggested.

"Really?! But the book says..."

"Don't worry, we're still not going to compound anything. I need to make a few herbs for work, though, so I'll be using Herb Cultivation then."

"Really?! Thank you!"

I made herbs for Kales practically every day, and there wasn't any harm in just growing them. It'd be a great time to show her again.

"Ruff, fruff!" Leo looked at me disapprovingly and pointed her snout down at the book.

"Okay, girl, I get it. We'll keep on studying."

Looks like we have another study buddy. A silver fenrir learning about medicine... Who'd have thought?



"MR. HIROOKA, Milicia. Perhaps you should take a break now?"

After studying for some time, Laila called out to us.

I looked up and checked the time. "Oh, you're right. I guess we've been at it for a while."

"It's starting to get dark now."

We must've been really into it.

I stretched. "Welp, I guess that's it for today."

"Can we keep studying after we take a break?" Milicia asked.

I cast a glance at Laila as she prepared tea. "It's almost dinner, and I've got other plans after that. I think this is enough studying for today."

"Oh... Okay."

Leo nodded sagely. "Ruff."

Even I was starting to enjoy studying, but it couldn't be good to cover too

much ground all at once. Besides, Milicia had to be tired after the day she'd had. I could tell Leo agreed with my decision, too.

She really did study with us the whole time, huh?

"Here you are," Laila said as she placed teacups in front of us.

"Thank you." I took a sip.

Studying wasn't physically exhausting, but it used a lot of brainpower. I could feel the tea soothing my aching brain.

Er, not literally, but it feels like it helps.

Milicia took one sip and started in surprise. "Wow! I've never had tea this good before!"

They were probably using high-quality tea leaves, and Laila's technique seemed to be perfect, so it was no small wonder Milicia never had tea like it at the orphanage.

I stretched and relaxed as I watched Laila pour Leo a bucket of milk. While she did that, Gelda arrived to call us for dinner, so we moved into the dining hall. Laila took our book and notes to put them away in my room.

"Thanks again," I said before she left.

"Come eat with us tonight, Milicia," Claire invited her as we walked in.

"A-Are you sure? I'm supposed to be a servant..."

"But today, you're our guest. Sit, I insist."

I could tell that Milicia was still unnerved by the whole situation. It wasn't surprising, given the sheer size of the table alone.

"You may as well take her up on it while you have the chance," I suggested.

She nodded hesitantly. "If you say so, Master, then okay."

Milicia sat on the other side of me from Leo, so that Leo was between us. Across from me were Claire and Tilura, as always. Sebastian must have been busy since he didn't seem to be present. Laila and Gelda were waiting by the walls like always.

I thought Laila went to my room, though? How is she here already?

As soon as Milicia put the first mouthful of food into her mouth, her eyes opened with shock. “This tastes sooooo good! How can anything be this tasty?!”

It’s Helena’s cooking, after all. It’s bound to be delicious.

Claire giggled. “I’ll be sure to let Helena know you like it.”

Milicia’s cheeks blushed slightly with embarrassment, but she kept eating with gusto.

After dinner and tea, Gelda led Milicia to her room for the night, and Tilura and I headed out into the garden for our evening training. I didn’t have a lot of time to train, what with all the studying Milicia and I did, so I was determined to get some good practice swings in.

After we finished, I wiped the sweat from my brow. “Nice work this evening, Tilura.”

“Thanks! I worked extra hard today, and I’m gonna work extra hard again tomorrow!”

I made sure I was totally sweat-free before heading inside and going to my room. The textbook Milicia and I had been reading was right on my desk, where Laila said she’d leave it.

“I guess I should prepare for tomorrow’s lessons.”

“Ruff, ruff!”

After all, what kind of teacher would I be if I didn’t prepare for class? Although I guess most teachers would know the topic they’re teaching, huh?

I sat down and opened the book, and Leo sat right behind me so she could look over my shoulder.

“Wuff...” She seemed to be thinking hard about something.

“Wait, can you really read, Leo?”

She nodded. “Woof!”

Wow... And here I thought she could only follow along before because we

were reading aloud. Is this a silver fenrir thing, too? I guess there's no telling how well she understands the material, though.

"Hmm... Oh, okay. I think I get it," I muttered as I read.

"Woof! Ruff, ruff. Woo, roo, woo!"

Together, we read late into the night.

This is definitely cutting into my sleeping time, but it's worth it for review.



THE next day after breakfast, Milicia and I went out into the garden for a little Herb Cultivation. Leo and I started off with a bit of practice, but as soon as we finished, I found a secluded corner of the garden to grow in.

I couldn't land a hit on Leo again today... I'm not surprised, but that doesn't make it less frustrating.

"I know you showed me this before, but that really is so amazing," Milicia breathed as she stared at the plant growing under my hands.

"Yeah, I know. Even I can't believe it sometimes."

I never could quite get used to the sight of it.

As I finished growing and picking the last herbs, I handed them off to Laila.

"You're so amazing, Master!" There was pure wonder in Milicia's eyes.

Stop it, you're making me blush.

At that moment, Gelda came out to see me. "M-Mr. Hirooka? Nick is here for you."

"Oh, thanks. I'll go see him right away."

I met him in the parlor just like before, and I handed him the herbs Laila had bagged for me. With that, my work for the day was done.

Even with a Gift, though, should work be this easy? I was used to working myself ragged to earn a paycheck, so it felt downright unnatural. Not that I'm complaining, I guess. It's nice to have time to myself.

As I headed back to the garden, however, I ran into a familiar face in the

entrance hall.

“I have returned.”

“Nicola? You’re back!” I said.

Before long, Claire, Sebastian, and I were sitting down with him in the parlor, eagerly awaiting his message from Eckenhart.

Sebastian opened the meeting. “What did His Grace have to say?”

Nicola paused a moment. “I bear mixed tidings.”

Apparently, he had run into Eckenhart halfway to the main mansion. Nicola had gotten the gist of the problem with the Yugard store before leaving town and reported everything to Eckenhart, from the involvement of the neighboring count to Yugard clearing out all the medicine in town to the mysterious timing of the outbreak. In turn, Eckenhart had ordered us to stand by and observe the situation until we had conclusive evidence.

“I guess not even Eckenhart has a silver bullet for this, huh,” I muttered.

He could shut down the Yugard store in a heartbeat, but it’d put him in hot water politically. He would, apparently, be conducting his own investigation on the count.

Sebastian stroked his chin. “I see... Very well.”

“You must be tired,” Claire said to Nicola. “Why don’t you rest for today?”

“As milady wills it.” He turned to me. “Thank you, noble sir, for the herbs.”

“Oh, no problem. I’m glad they helped.”

With that, he bowed first to Claire and Sebastian and then to me before leaving the room. It looked like even with the stamina herbs I’d given him, the ride had taken a lot out of him.

Claire sighed. “I wish there was something we could do now.”

Sebastian furrowed his brow slightly. “Regrettably, it seems we shall have to wait.”

They were probably even more upset than I was about the Yugard store. Eckenhart had to have a plan, though, so all we could do was watch and wait.

Claire got up to leave. “Well, I shall see you at lunch.”

I nodded. “See you.”

They bowed to me once before leaving the room, all their earlier energy gone. Only Laila, Leo, and I were left in the parlor.

“Watch and wait, huh...?”

There has to be some way to help all the suffering townsfolk, though.

“There’s nothing I can do either way, though.”

I gulped down the cup of tea that Laila had prepared for me before heading out into the garden to sweat away my troubles.



“**SO**, uh, Milicia? Why are you running with us?”

“*Hahh... hahh...* I’m pretty good...at exercising...” Milicia smiled at me.

When I went out into the back, Milicia, Tilura, and I all started running together.

“Fine by me, I guess. Are you sure you want to train with us until lunch, though?”

“Of course. And we’re going to study after lunch, right?!”

Hopefully, a little exercise was all I would need to clear my head. Ever since learning about all the vile things that fake apothecary was up to, I’d found myself in a grim mood. I was determined to run it clean out of my system before Laila came to call us for lunch. Milicia was a little worried at first that I’d be too tired to focus on studying after lunch, but with a few recovery herbs, I was confident I’d be fine.

I’ll just have to not fall asleep.

After lunch, we sat in the same spot as yesterday in the parlor and opened the textbook to where we’d left off.

“Okay, let’s do this!” Milicia said, firing herself up.

Fortunately, reviewing the book last night paid off, and I was able to answer

all her questions without difficulty.

I knew it'd be worth it.

"M-Mr. Hirooka?" Gelda poked her head into the room several hours later. "It's time for dinner."

"Thanks," I said as I nodded to her. "All right, Milicia, looks like that's it for today."

"Okay."

We had made more progress than I was hoping, but that wasn't thanks to my review. Rather, it was because the book Sebastian gave us was so easy to understand. I went over a few key points in my head as I made for the dining hall. Since Milicia was officially a servant now, she wouldn't be eating with us.

I wonder when and where the servants eat, though? The mysteries only deepen.



"AHHAHA! Stop it, Miss Leo, that tickles!"

"Ruff, ruff!"

"Arf!"

I watched Tilura play with Leo and Cherie as I enjoyed my post-meal tea. It seemed almost like she was trying to put us all at ease, since most of us were still in low spirits.

"I'm so sorry," Claire said to me.

"No, I should be the one apologizing." I grimaced. "Leo, Cherie, and Tilura are the only ones who seem to be in a good mood right now."

I'll have to be more careful. I almost forgot how sensitive both kids and animals can be to others' moods.

Claire and I watched them play, smiling all the while. It felt like my first breath of fresh air in a long time. After we finished with our tea, Tilura and I got ready for our evening training.

"Good night, Takumi," Claire said.

“Yeah. Good night.”

After an uneventful evening of practice swings, Leo and I headed back to our room. I finished reading the last of the textbook to prepare for tomorrow’s lesson, then crawled into bed.

I’ll have to ask Sebastian if he has any more books for us.



THE next few days were as normal as could be. I trained with Leo and cultivated herbs in the morning, handed the herbs off to Nick right before lunch, and studied with Milicia all afternoon. Sebastian happened to have an intermediate book on medicine for us, so we’d been using that. Then, I’d end the day with practice swings with Tilura, and the next day would be more of the same.

As an aside, Milicia was training to be a servant whenever she wasn’t studying medicine with me. She apparently wanted to be of some use to everyone while she was living with us. And Gelda, of course, was more than happy to finally have someone younger and more inexperienced than she was.

Interlude Claire: Discussing Prices with Sebastian

“OH, there you are, Sebastian!”

“At your service, milady. What might I help you with?”

Sebastian came into my room. He had been awfully busy since he began his investigations into that wretched Yugard store, but this was an important matter that couldn't afford to wait. The report I'd just read contained some rather dire news.

“You know how the epidemic has been easing up a little thanks to Takumi's efforts, right?” I said.

“So it would seem. His capwort has deeply penetrated the local market.”

Unfortunately, that wasn't all the report had to say on the matter.

“It doesn't seem as though it's reached the entire town, though,” I lamented. “Cases are dropping, but only slowly. We should consider ourselves lucky that there haven't been quite as many new cases as of late.”

“For that, I believe we have Mr. Hirooka's so-called sanitary measures to thank,” Sebastian said. “The flyers we sent out have been taking effect.”

Basic hygiene was common sense, as was washing one's hands, but gargling was a totally new concept to me. Takumi seemed to be quite knowledgeable on the spread of diseases, and while I doubted every resident was following the new precautions, those who did were certainly helping to flatten the curve.

“I would imagine the remaining cases are simply due to the capwort not reaching those who are already ill,” Sebastian concluded.

I sighed. “Oh, if only it were that simple. You see, Kales had completely sold out of capwort on the first day, but now he regularly has stock left over. Now, it *is* only one store in the entire town, so I can't imagine it would cover everyone, but there should still be plenty of people who need it. It makes no sense why there is stock left over right now.”

That was my largest concern. The location of Kales's store was even listed on the fliers, so it shouldn't be an issue of ignorance, either.

"Do you suppose the Yugard store is interfering somehow?" I said, voicing my fears.

Sebastian shook his head. "I've seen no indication of that yet. I have, however, received word that their customers have begun to lessen considerably."

"Good. That means fewer people will be deceived by them, then. But that still doesn't explain why the capwort at Kales's hasn't been selling as well."

I didn't doubt that Sebastian's information was trustworthy. He had served our family for many years, and I had absolute faith in his capabilities and loyalty.

He stroked his beard, deep in thought. "Hmm... I might know the issue."

"You do? What is it?"

"It's possible that the lower classes are simply unable to afford it, despite how much they would like to."

"Really?" I blinked in surprise. "Capwort isn't that expensive, is it?"

It was one of the cheaper medicines, in fact, and Kales's store sold it at a very reasonable price. There shouldn't be any reason to raise the price to account for supply issues, either.

Why don't they just buy it, then? It'd be much better to recover and get back to work than waste time and money lying in bed.

Sebastian grimaced a little. "It's entirely possible that they still cannot afford it. A substantial number of Ractos's residents live from payday to payday and cannot accommodate such expenses. Their financial situation would become even more dire if they fell ill."

"Dire enough that they can't even afford medicine? Oh... And I suppose it's hardly fair to force them to buy it."

"Naturally not. Of course, should you order that everyone must buy capwort, they'll have no choice but to obey, but doing so would have a palpable impact on their lives post-recovery."

I could envision that easily enough. I knew that wasn't a reasonable solution from the beginning.

"What should we do, then? They can't afford medicine if they don't work, but they can't work if they're still sick... Wait."

"Do you have an idea, milady?"

"Why don't we just sell capwort for cheaper, then?" I suggested.

If they can't afford it, we can simply lower the price. That way, anyone can afford it, no matter how poor.

Sebastian burst out laughing. "Hohoho! Lower the price, you say? And here I thought you'd suggest giving it away for free!"

"Well, we can do that if we have to. If selling medicine normally still isn't enough, or the spread of the disease picks up again, I think it's a valid plan."

"So you say. But the only capwort we have is what Mr. Hirooka can provide to us. Given that he could not possibly make enough for the entire city, however, and that cases are already dropping, I believe that staying our current course would prove wiser."

Come to think of it, there were more issues than supply alone. For one thing, any merchant trying to sell capwort legally would be immediately hit with losses. Yugard's near-monopoly up until now had likely hit them hard as it was, but if our family were to hand out medicine for free, they would have cause to accuse us of obstructing their business.

Simply lowering the price would also impact the market, but as long as we were still technically selling it, we shouldn't run into any complaints from the other sellers.

"What if we temporarily lower the price and raise it again once the epidemic is over? That should limit the economic impact," I said.

I had no doubt that Sebastian and Kales could pull it off if they tried, and I'd put everything I had into the plan myself.

Sebastian nodded, but I could see his brow furrow. "Limiting the price would indeed limit the backlash. I'm afraid it isn't that simple, however."

“What? Is there something I’m missing?”

“We would need Mr. Hirooka’s consent in that case.”

“Oh... Right. I remember his contract says we need his consent if the price changes. I doubt Kales would do such a thing, but some stores might increase the sales price of their goods without informing him so as to secure a greater cut of the profit.”

“Precisely. As such, this is hardly an issue we can solve between the two of us. I imagine he would agree, of course.”

I let out a heavy sigh. “He’s quite the generous soul, after all. He wouldn’t want to abandon people in need. The real question, however, is how he feels about it long-term.”

“Therein lies the problem.”

It felt like I was letting an awful lot rest on his conscience. While I couldn’t imagine he would complain to me directly, he might feel discontent that we couldn’t solve the issue without shaving off his paycheck.

No, he’s not that type. Still, I’d hate it if he thought I was underappreciating him or if he grew to resent me over this...

“Don’t you have any other ideas?” I asked Sebastian.

He shook his head. “None that we can put into action with any urgency, I’m afraid. We’ll have to confront him about it directly.”

Oh, no... What now?

For some reason, keeping Takumi happy seemed even more important to me than the success of our plan.

No, he’ll definitely think I’m odd at this rate. He’d prefer it if I help the townsfolk, won’t he? Oh, but then I’ll have to talk to him to make that happen.

I let out another heavy sigh. “Oh, dear...” Just then, I heard Sebastian stifle a chuckle. I shot him a hard look. “I’m sorry, do you find this funny?”

He smirked. “I can see your every thought on your face, you know. It’s quite amusing.”

“Honestly, grow up. Can’t you see we need a new plan altogether?”

“As I said, milady, you’ll simply have to talk to him directly. Do you really believe he would be so short-sighted as to lose favor with you for saving lives?”

“Well, I... Wait, how did you know what I was thinking?”

“I’ve known you for a good many years now, milady. I’ve quite the sense for guessing your thoughts by your expressions alone.”

I knew I should’ve been furious with him, but for some reason, all I felt was resignation. He was one of the smartest people I knew, and he had served the family since I was born. I wasn’t surprised he knew me that well.

I bet he wouldn’t have had such an easy time of it if I hadn’t been thinking of Takumi, though.

“All right, you win! I’ll talk with Takumi about this myself.”

It was never my intention for Sebastian to know exactly how I felt, but now that it was out, I was determined to talk to Takumi.

Oh, I hope he won’t hate me for this, I silently prayed to the mark of our house, the silver fenrir pendant around my neck.

M-Maybe I should ask Miss Leo first?

Sebastian smiled at me. “Perhaps I should ask Mr. Hirooka in your place? I shall endeavor to maintain his pristine image of you.”

“Y-You would do that for me? Oh, please do! I’ll be rooting for you from a safe distance away.”

“As you will.”

Sebastian’s an absolute godsend. As I thanked Sebastian inwardly, we continued to discuss any possible repercussions of our plan.

Thank goodness Sebastian suggested talking in my place... I have no idea what would’ve happened if I had to do it myself. I know I can’t keep letting him handle all the hard things in life for me, but this time, I’ll let myself indulge.

Why in the world is talking to Takumi so hard when I can handle nobles with such ease, though? How utterly confusing.

Chapter 2: Offering to Help Visitors to the Mansion

“MILADY, you have visitors.”

Several uneventful days after Milicia’s arrival, Laila announced our guests as Claire and I were having after-lunch tea in the dining hall.

“Guests for me?” Claire seemed baffled. “I don’t recall inviting anyone.”

Claire and Laila turned to leave the room, but just when I thought I’d be left behind, Laila turned to face me.

“I imagine this will have something to do with you as well. Could I trouble you to come along?”

“Me? Uh, okay. If you say so.”

Now I’m really lost... Seriously, who is it?

It almost definitely had something to do with my herbs, but if it was Nick or Kales, Laila would’ve said so.

I got up to follow them, while Leo, Cherie, and Tilura opted to stay behind.

After all, if Leo came, the guest might have a heart attack.

We stepped into the parlor to find an old man and a young girl waiting there. As soon as they noticed Claire, they stood up and bowed politely.

“My humblest apologies for interrupting you,” the man croaked.

“Who are you?” Claire asked as she sat down at the table across from them.

“I go by the name of Hannes, and I am the mayor of the village of Lange. This is my granddaughter, Rosalie.”

The girl bowed again. “It’s a pleasure.”

She was probably about twelve or thirteen, just a touch older than Tilura, but she looked every bit as athletic. She seemed stiff with anxiety.

Uh... Where should I sit? Next to Claire, I guess?

After a little more waffling, I took the seat beside her. Since nobody shot me any strange looks, it seemed like the right choice.

“I’m Claire Libert of House Libert, and the current steward of this mansion.”

“My word... Lady Claire in the flesh!” The old man—Hannes—bowed so low his forehead skimmed the table. “I’ve heard the rumors, but never did I presume to lay eyes on you! Pray forgive my insolence, but we are in dire need of your aid!”

What rumors? Judging from his reaction, they’re all good ones, but I guess this isn’t a good time to ask.

“What’s bothering you?” she asked.

Hannes raised his head deferentially. “I regret to inform you that a terrible blight has stricken our fair village.”

“A blight? You mean the epidemic?” I blurted out.

He cast me a quick glance before turning back to Claire. “I’m afraid so. At first, it was only one of us...”

Hannes went on to describe how the disease had spread throughout the entire village, and that almost everyone was now sick in bed. Even he and Rosalie had caught it, but they managed to recover with the capwort they’d had on hand. It sounded like the same disease that was hitting Ractos. Unfortunately, Lange had only a small supply of medicine, and after he and Rosalie were cured, there was hardly any left.

The two of them then went into Ractos to buy more capwort, but there he found out about the medicine shortage. His first stop was the Yugard store, but fortunately, he was able to discern their medicine wouldn’t help before buying anything. Just when he was starting to worry, he caught wind of Kales’s store. He was overjoyed to learn their medicine was effective, but since he needed an entire village’s worth, he couldn’t buy all that he needed. After talking with Kales, he learned that the store was overseen by the Libert family, and thinking Claire might be able to help, he came to the mansion.

“I see,” Claire mused. “So Kales sent you here.”

Kales knew about my Gift, so even if he couldn't tell Hannes about it directly, he was able to point him toward us, knowing we could help him. Since Laila had heard the gist of his request when he first came in, she asked me to be there as well.

"Please, won't you save us?" he begged.

"Please!" Rosalie echoed.

They both stood up and bowed deeply to Claire, so deeply that they nearly grazed the ground. Claire still seemed to be considering it, however.

She turned to face me. "Can I borrow you for a second?"

"Of course."

"Hannes, Rosalie, please wait here for a minute. You can raise your head. Don't worry, I have no intention of simply abandoning you."

"A-All right."

As they both sat back in their chairs, Claire and I continued talking in hushed voices.

"What do you think?" she whispered. "I know you could make that much capwort if you wanted to."

"You're worried about me overextending myself?"

She nodded slightly. "I don't want you to faint again."

We both wanted to help them if we could. I had no idea where Lange was, but it had to be pretty far, and I didn't want to send them home empty-handed.

"What if I make less capwort for Kales's store?" I suggested.

"That might cause more problems in Ractos, so I'd rather avoid that."

Especially considering the Yugard store was still at large, decreasing the amount of legitimate medicine could only spell trouble.

Claire's brow furrowed slightly. "Do you have any other ideas?"

"Hmm..." I turned back toward the visitors. "Hannes, how long does it take to get to your village? By horse, of course."

He stopped to think for a moment. “It’s about a three days’ ride, considering you’d have to pass through Ractos.”

“Oh, okay. Thank you.”

I noticed that Hannes was sizing me up and trying to figure out why I was there.

Come to think of it, he hasn’t heard about me, has he? No wonder he’s confused about why I’m at Claire’s side like this.

“Claire?” I whispered. “How quickly do you think Leo could make that three days’ ride?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say maybe one day.”

“Okay. I think I have a plan, then.”

Basically, I just had to avoid using Herb Cultivation too much on any one day. If I spread out all the herbs I needed to cultivate over several days instead of doing it all at once, I’d be fine—and with Leo, we could reach the village in time, too.

“All right,” Claire said with a nod after I shared my idea with her. “We’ll go with that plan, then. Since you’ll be pacing yourself, Sebastian shouldn’t be opposed to it, either.”

“I hope so.”

Come to think of it, he’s not here right now. I really wish he could help us brainstorm... He always has a better grasp of the big picture than I do.

With that, Claire turned back to address Hannes. “We’ve decided to lend you our aid.”

“Really?!”

Both he and Rosalie looked overjoyed.

“This is Takumi. He’s our resident apothecary.”

He raised an eyebrow at me. “You are?”

I scratched my head. “Sorry I didn’t introduce myself sooner. I’ll be preparing all the capwort your village will need.”

“Ah, I see! Thank you so much for your generosity!” He bowed to me gratefully, tears gathering in the corners of his eyes.

I can only imagine how rough it must've been, what with his whole village sick. Hopefully, I've given him some peace of mind now.

“Can you head back to your village first?” I asked.

“Of course, but what about the medicine?”

“I'll prepare it for you, but we don't have enough for everyone at the moment.”

His expression darkened slightly. “So you can't save everyone, then?”

Looks like I'll have to explain my plan a little better.

“Don't worry, I'll make sure everyone is cured. It just won't necessarily be in the way you're expecting.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I have a plan...” I said, then began explaining my thoughts to them.

First, Hannes and Rosalie would return to the village. They'd take three days by horse to make it back, but I could make the trip in one with Leo. That meant I could afford to take two days to make the medicine they needed before leaving. There was no guarantee I could make enough for everyone, of course, but once I had as much as I could make, I'd head straight to Lange after them. That way, they would have at least most of the capwort they needed around the time they made it back to the village. I wouldn't faint from overusing my Gift, and I had no doubt Leo would be willing to run for a good cause.

Hannes shook his head in confusion. “But how is it even possible for you to catch up to us so easily when we'll have several days' head start?”

I guess he doesn't know about Leo, so it's only natural he'd be confused.

“Well, let's just say that horses aren't necessarily the fastest way to travel,” I said vaguely.

“It isn't?” He knitted his eyebrows, his confusion deepening.

“How can you outrun a horse?” Rosalie asked.

At this rate, they'd only believe me if they saw proof.

"Laila? Can you call Leo in here?"

"As you wish."

Hannes and Rosalie exchanged questioning looks.

Leo's probably out in the garden, so it shouldn't take her long to come back in.

While we waited for Leo to arrive, however, I took the time to explain my plan in greater detail.



"PARDON me. I have brought Miss Leo."

"Thanks, Laila," I said.

Laila curtsied at the doorway. Then, Leo came in from behind her.

"Ruff?"

"Wh-What's that?!" squealed Rosalie.

"Is that a wolf? N-No...a fenrir?!"

Both Hannes and Rosalie were frozen from fear.

Yeah, not surprising.

"Don't worry, she won't hurt you," I reassured them. "This is Leo. She *almost* never attacks people."

Hannes shot me a wide-eyed look. "Y-You're sure we're safe?"

"Of course. She may be a silver fenrir, but she listens to what I say, and she's very well-behaved. There's nothing to be afraid of, right, girl?"

"Roooo!"

"A s-silver fenrir...?" Hannes was still speechless, and hearing she was a silver fenrir probably didn't help.

Oh, well. I guess I'll just hope they get used to her.

"Ruff? Wuff, wuff..." Leo cocked her head to the side and leaned in close to the visitors. "*Sniff sniff*"

Rosalie flinched back and half-hid under the table. “Eep!”

“Whoa there! Everything okay, Leo?” I moved to pull her back, but just then, she stopped and turned toward me.

“WOO-WOO! Bark!” *They smell just like that bad place Milicia was in! They’re dangerous!* She seemed to be telling me.

“Dangerous? C’mon, they’re perfectly harmless,” I said.

“Ruff. Bark! Roo-roo-arooooo!”

“Oh, it’s the smell on their clothes? Huh...?”

“Is Miss Leo all right?” Claire asked.

Hannes and Rosalie looked every bit as confused as Claire was.

So their clothes smell just like the orphanage Milicia was at...

I told them Leo’s findings.

“Do you think she’s smelling the illness?” Claire asked, hand on her chin in thought. “That’s the only common strand between their village and the orphanage.”

“Maybe.” I mulled it over for a moment. “Leo, do you smell danger from anywhere besides their clothes?”

“Ru-ruff!” She shook her head no.

It probably is the illness, then.

“I’m starting to get worried about this scent,” Claire said.

“Yeah. It might be the illness itself... Or maybe there’s something else afoot at Lange.” I looked up at Leo. “Aside from their clothes, do Hannes and Rosalie smell okay?”

“Wuff. Woo, roo, ru-roo.”

“Oh, the smell isn’t as strong on their bodies, so they’ll be fine? Okay.”

Hopefully, that means they won’t get sick again, and that we can get close to them without anything bad happening.

“Let’s see... Your name’s Rosalie, right?” I said to the granddaughter.

She flinched slightly, visibly surprised that she was being brought into the conversation now. “Y-Yes, that’s me!”

“There’s no need to be so scared of Leo. She loves kids. Would you like to play with her?”

“She... She won’t eat me, right?”

“Don’t worry, she won’t. See?”

I took her hand and put it on Leo’s flank.

“Wow... She’s so fluffy!” Her unease melted away almost instantly.

“Woof, woof!”

I could feel the heavy atmosphere enveloping the parlor begin to lighten up a little.

“See? She loves kids, and she’d never hurt you.”

Hannes shook his head in disbelief. “I never thought I’d see a silver fenrir, let alone such a tame one.”

Nobody would get that impression from the legends, after all.

“Roooooo!”

Leo hunkered down so that Rosalie could climb onto her back, and with her rider in place, she jaunted around the room.

“Hahaha! You’re so cool, Miss Leo!”

Wow, Rosalie got used to her quickly. Kids really are amazing.

“Anyhow, back to what I was saying,” I continued. “If I ride Leo, I can catch up to you two even if you have a head start.”

“She runs with people on her?” Hannes asked.

I nodded. “She’s far faster than any horse. She should be able to make it to Lange in a day.”

I didn’t know how far it was exactly, but I trusted Claire’s estimate. Leo might be able to make even better time if she sprinted all the way there, but since I didn’t want to get shaken off halfway, it probably wasn’t smart to try it.

“I see,” Hannes mused. “I believe I understand now. Between you, Lady Claire, and your surprisingly friendly silver fenrir, you seem trustworthy enough.”

I could tell he still had some reservations, but I was glad to hear him agree all the same. The more someone seemed to know about silver fenrir, the more they seemed to trust me for being with her. It hurt a little to know that they didn’t trust me for who I was, but I’d have time to build that up later. For now, I was just grateful to have such a great partner.

“Looks like it’s settled, then,” Claire said. “If you don’t mind, Laila.”

“Of course.” Laila approached Hannes from where she was waiting by the wall.

“You must be tired from your long journey,” Claire said. “You’re welcome to rest here for the day.”

“Why, I’m flattered by the offer, but...are you sure?”

“The medicine will take time to prepare, and overexerting yourself will only make your job harder.”

“Well, if you insist.”

With that, Hannes and Rosalie decided to spend the night with us. After all, at Hanne’s age, it couldn’t hurt to take it a little easier.

“I’ll start getting the medicine ready,” I said. “I’ll be out for a while, so don’t wait for me.”

“Wuff?”

“Oh, don’t worry, Leo. You can stay here and play with Rosalie.”

That’ll help them get used to Leo sooner, and Rosalie would probably have more fun that way.

“Ruuuff!”

With that, I left the parlor.



OUT in the garden, I found Tilura, Milicia, and Cherie chasing each other

around and playing.

Man, they have a lot of energy.

“Are you going to train some more?” Tilura asked as soon as she noticed me.

“Not yet. Something came up, so I don’t know if I’ll be able to at all today. Sorry.”

Not only did I have to make enough herbs for the whole village of Lange, but I also needed to do it without decreasing the shipments I sent off to Kales’s. I headed to a secluded corner of the garden to get right to work.

“It’s not like you to skip training,” Milicia said worriedly. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’ll be fine. I just need to make more capwort than I’d thought.” I told her everything that had happened inside.

“Oh, let me help! I know a thing or two about handling herbs properly now,” she offered.

“Thanks, that’d be a big help.”

While watching Tilura train out of the corner of my eye, I got right to work on the capwort. I let Milicia harvest the plants I’d grown—while she was still inexperienced, she needed the practice. I was just like her not too long ago.

“Your Gift really is so cool, Master.”

“Hahaha... It’s not like I can do this forever, though.”

Milicia and I chatted while we worked. Occasionally I’d dry all the capwort she picked so that she could wrap them in cloth and set them aside for transport. After a short while, we had a sizeable pile ready, more than I’d grown for the orphanage the other day.

I dusted off my hands. “That should be enough for today.”

“Great job, Master!”

“You did well, too. Thanks again for helping.”

Despite the work I put her through, she still seemed to have plenty of energy left. It looked like I could count on her help for the next couple of days as well. It was actually nice to have an apprentice.

It looks like I'll be able to send Hannes and Rosalie off with some medicine just in case they reach Lange first.

Tilura wandered over to us. "Takumi? I'm done training!"

"Great work, Tilura. Here's your herbs for today. Make sure you eat them and get some of your strength back." I handed her an herb for relieving sore muscles.

"Okay! Thank you!"

Milicia looked at me in surprise. "When did you have time to make those, Master?"

Over my recent experiments, I'd gotten to the point where I could make capwort with one hand and an entirely different herb with the other. Of course, they both had to be herbs that I was familiar with growing.

"Wuff?"

"Huh? Leo?"

As I stood up to stretch, I saw Leo making her way toward me. It took me a moment to realize that Rosalie was still on her back.

Ah, so they're out here to play. That explains it.

"Miss Leo!"

"Arf, arf!"

"Ruff, ruff!"

Tilura and Cherie both ran toward Leo as soon as they laid eyes on her.

I bet Tilura and Rosalie will become fast friends. Rosalie doesn't seem like the shy type, after all.

Milicia and I watched the three of them cling to Leo and ride around the garden. Just as I'd thought, they all got along famously, and I had no doubt that their mutual fluffy friend had something to do with it.

"You know you can join them if you want," I said to Milicia.

She shook her head. "No, I'm fine."

From the way she was fidgeting, though, she had to be itching to join them.

Come to think of it, Milicia's the only kid who didn't get to play with Leo at the orphanage.

"C'mon, I bet Leo would love to have another playmate."

"B-But..." As she protested, though, I urged her forward with a hand on her back until we were right in front of them.

"Leo? Do you have a moment?" I asked.

"Ruff?" *What's up?*

Everyone turned to look at me with curiosity.

Wow, they're getting along well.

"Do you mind if Milicia joins you?"

Leo was the first to reply. "Woof, wuff! Woo-woo!"

"Of course!" Tilura shouted. "The more, the merrier!"

Rosalie nodded. "It'd be more fun with you here, too, Milicia."

"Arf, arf!"

Finally, Milicia agreed. "O-Okay!"

As they all played together, I gave the herbs Milicia and I made to Gelda and asked her to put them away for safekeeping. Since the sun was already starting to set, I joined in the fun with Leo and the others until it was time for dinner. When it came time to stop, I could tell Milicia was a little put out, so I resolved to play with them again soon.

At dinner, we invited Hannes and Rosalie to the table as our guests.

"Are you sure we should be dining with you, Lady Claire?" Hannes asked uncertainly.

"Of course. Just because I'm of House Libert doesn't mean I care for formalities. I want you both to rest as much as you can for tomorrow."

"Thank you very much for your generosity."

"Thank you!" Rosalie echoed.

I could see that the tension still hadn't left his shoulders, however.

I'm not surprised. Claire's father technically owns his whole village.

Rosalie, on the other hand, seemed to be completely at ease after playing with Leo. She started eating right away, and I spotted Claire smiling contentedly at her.

"This tastes sooo good!" Rosalie enthused a few large bites later.

"Rosalie! Behave yourself!" Hannes scolded.

"Oh, I don't mind," Claire cut in. "I'd much rather see her enjoy her food frankly instead of standing on formality. Isn't that right, Helena?"

Helena nodded from where she stood by the kitchen doors. "There's no greater compliment to a chef."

Looking around, I could tell nobody else had a problem with the way Rosalie was eating, either.

There's nothing quite like seeing a kid smile like that, after all.

After dinner, Claire instructed a maid to take Hannes and Rosalie to their room for the night.

"Try to sleep well, now."

"Thank you very much for your kindness, Lady Claire."

"Good night, Lady Claire."

With that, the two of them were led out of the dining hall.

After watching them leave, I started heading out to the garden for my evening training when Sebastian called out to me.

"Mr. Hirooka? A word?"

"Sebastian? What's up?"

"I've heard about today's developments from milady. If I may be so bold, I believe there may be ways of solving this issue without you and Miss Leo having to go to Lange yourselves."

"Yeah... Maybe."

He'd probably come up with a new plan, one that likely involved taking more time. The obvious options that came to mind would involve either putting off the delivery to Lange until there would be enough for everyone guaranteed or else finding a way for them to buy the capwort in Ractos.

"Maybe there isn't a real reason for Leo and me to go. But something Leo said is really bugging me."

"Ah, yes. The unpleasant smell coming from their clothes, correct?"

"That's it. Leo said it smelled dangerous."

"And you suppose it's linked to the illness?"

"Maybe. Leo wasn't sure. I think we should look into it, though."

If she was smelling a bacteria or something, it could be the cause of the epidemic. Since everyone in the village was infected, it wouldn't be unusual for them to carry the infection on their clothes. But it could be far worse than that—I'd only seen Leo react like that when she was warning me of a monster attack.

"Plus, there's a chance we can find some sort of clue linking the epidemic back to the Yugard store," I added.

Sebastian nodded slowly. "There is some evidence that indicates the individual responsible for buying Ractos's medicine stock may be spreading the disease. You think this same individual has ties to Lange, then?"

"I honestly have no idea. But if they visited the village, there might be a clue left behind."

I mean, nobody can just snap their fingers and cause a plague, right? That part's probably just a coincidence.

Whatever Leo was smelling was linked to the sickness, though, that much was certain. Even if we came back empty-handed, it couldn't hurt to check.

Sebastian frowned. "I'm afraid I fail to see why you need to investigate this yourself."

"Maybe, but I'm tired of doing so little," I admitted. "The epidemic's getting worse and worse, and all I can do is sit here and make herbs."

“Ah, but what if you think of this as an opportunity to increase your profits?”

He had a point. If I wanted to, I could make a killing selling medicine now.

“Sorry. The last thing I want to do is profit from people’s suffering. That’d make me no better than Yugard...although I guess my medicine actually works.”

“I see you’re no entrepreneur.”

“Hahaha, I might not go that far. It’s just that I’ve had to cultivate more and more herbs recently, and it’d be nice to have to work less,” I said with a smile.

Sure, call me lazy, but it’s better than being greedy.

Making herbs for Lange was completely necessary, of course, and I wanted to get over the pandemic as soon as possible. It looked like it’d be smooth sailing after that, though.

Sebastian sighed. “You’re more stubborn than milady herself, you realize?”

“Hahaha... I’m not trying to give you a hard time,” I laughed wryly.

Fortunately, he seemed to realize that he wasn’t going to get anywhere with his current line of reasoning, and he gave up.

“If you truly wish to investigate the source of this smell, then you and Miss Leo would indeed be ideal for getting to the bottom of this,” Sebastian conceded.

“I almost hope we don’t find anything, though.”

We didn’t have any guarantee there’d be any clues there. I had to admit that I was also curious about what this world held outside of the mansion and Ractos, but I could tell that wouldn’t help me convince Sebastian.

I may as well check this world out more, though. It’d be a shame not to.

“If you are set on going, however, I should at least teach you some magic first.”

“Magic? Really?!”

Come to think of it, he never did continue that lecture we started back when I first arrived here. Tilura interrupted us when she got better, and I’d heard nothing since. I was told I had an aptitude for magic when we visited Ractos,

and I could probably use it if I tried, although I'd made no further attempt to pursue it.

"You may have learned the way of the sword from His Grace," Sebastian said with a smile, "but there are some predicaments you can't hack and slash your way out of."

I was still a total novice when it came to swordplay, even. I was able to handle Nick, but I doubted my abilities against any other threat. If I ran across an enemy I couldn't fight back with a sword alone, I was powerless—not counting Leo's aid, of course.

"With Leo at my side, I really doubt I'll ever be in that much trouble, but I guess it can't hurt to learn it," I said.

"Indeed. You may well encounter a monster on the road, after all. While I can hardly teach you anything but the basics in such a short period of time, it may well aid you."

"That makes sense. You can never know too much self-defense, right?"

I'd seen some magic in this world already. None of it seemed like it'd be much use in a fight, but each spell had its applications.

Sebastian chuckled. "Cultivating herbs, sword training, and now magic lessons... You're quite the busy fellow, aren't you?"

"Hahaha... Please don't work me too hard."

I've always wanted to learn magic. I wonder what he's going to teach me? I could barely rein in my excitement as I headed out to the garden for sword practice. I hope he's not too strict, though. I've got enough to do as it is... But what's one more thing on my plate, right?



THE next day, Hannes and Rosalie left to return to their village just after breakfast. Leo and I went to the gates with Claire to see them off.

Hannes bowed deeply. "Thank you once again for your most generous hospitality, Lady Claire."

"Thank you very much!" Rosalie echoed with an energetic little bow.

“You’re very welcome.” Claire smiled.

Leo plodded over to say goodbye. “Ruff, ruff!”

Rosalie grinned. “I’ll be waiting for you, Miss Leo! Come see me soon!”

I’m glad Leo’s made another friend.

“I’ll leave them to you, then, Phillip,” I said to the guard.

He nodded from the back of his horse. “They’re in good hands.”

Hannes and Rosalie had come to the mansion alone, but Phillip would escort them home. They had to make it back quickly and safely, after all.

“I’ll see you at Lange, then,” I told Hannes.

“Yes. We’ll be waiting for you.”

We watched as Hannes and Rosalie both mounted their horses, and the three of them rode off together.

Hannes doesn’t seem to have any trouble riding, even at his age. Maybe I should learn to ride a horse, too?

I’d probably never need to ride a horse with Leo around, though, and I had enough to do for the time being.

“I’ll get back to training and growing herbs, then,” I said.

Claire nodded. “Please do.”

“Just leave it to me.”

With that, I led Leo into the back garden, where I got right to training with Tilura and Cherie. When Milicia came out a short while later, I had her help me with the herbs.

“There, that should do it for today,” I said after a while.

“You did really well today, Master!”

Since I had Milicia to help me, I was able to grow and harvest even more capwort than I was hoping for. It still wasn’t enough for all of Lange, if Hannes’s population estimate was accurate, but at this rate, I’d have enough for maybe 80 percent of the people by the time I left. If I made more along the way and

once I got there, I should be able to cover everyone.

Man, it's hard to pace myself properly. It was so much easier when I was just forcing myself all the time.

When Nick arrived a short while later, I handed him a bigger bundle of herbs than usual.

"This is today's portion. Oh, and since I'll be leaving the mansion for a little while, I added enough herbs to tide you over," I said.

"You got it, boss!"

What with Kales's store to consider too, I sure need to grow a lot of herbs.

I couldn't exactly have Nick deliver the herbs from Lange, after all. If I didn't have that to consider, I'd be able to make enough capwort for Lange without breaking a sweat. As it was, though, I'd be cutting it close.

After the hand-off, we had lunch, and Milicia and I got some studying in.

"Master? What does this part here mean?"

"Oh, that? Let's see..."

Normally, we'd study all the way until dinner, but since I had magic lessons with Sebastian to consider, we could only fit in a few hours.

Laila checked the clock as the time approached. "Mr. Hirooka? It's time."

"Oh, thanks." I turned back to Milicia. "Sorry we couldn't fit in that much today."

"No, it's okay. I've still got a lot to learn as a servant, so I'll work extra hard at that instead!"

I silently thanked Milicia for her understanding as I headed out into the garden, where Sebastian awaited me.



"WELL then, Mr. Hirooka, let us begin."

"Yeah, I'm ready."

Sebastian wasted no time in getting started. I couldn't see Tilura practicing

anymore, so I figured Claire must've dragged her inside to study.

"Now, I believe I have already explained the fundamentals of magic to you," he began.

"Yep, I remember."

Magic ran on mana, and to convert mana into magic, you needed an incantation. The incantation decided the element of the magic, like fire or water, as well as what would happen. Then there were voiceless incantations, but Sebastian was interrupted just as he'd started to teach me that part last time, and he never got around to finishing.

"If you remember the basics, then I shan't bore you by repeating them. Now, before we proceed any further, I need to be clear that what you learn here may not be of significant use to you in a fight."

"Wait, it won't be?"

I thought the whole reason he was teaching me was so I could fight without my sword if I had to? Why is he teaching me this at all, then?

"The only magic one can truly rely on in a fight, after all, are voiceless incantations. Those require a great deal of time and effort to acquire, however, so I believe it best to get used to regular incantations first," he explained.

"Oh, okay. That makes sense."

Come to think of it, he did mention that regular incantations are too wordy for most fights.

Since voiceless incantations were an advanced technique, it was no wonder we wouldn't be starting with them. Just like swordplay, I'd have to start from the basics and work my way up.

"But fret not. For today's lesson, I have selected an incantation spell that has applications even on the battlefield."

"Wow, really?"

"Indeed. For what is magic but a tool? Any tool can be put to use with a sharp wit."

Oh, so just like my Gift, huh?

I had thought that Herb Cultivation was useless at first, after all.

“As such, today’s spell emits light. I trust you remember it?”

“Yeah. You used it back in that forest, right?”

It was so dark in some parts of those woods that he’d used a light spell so we could see.

How could that help in a fight, though?

“As you no doubt recall, the spell is most commonly used to keep one’s bearings in darkness.”

“But how can I fight with that?” I asked. “Assuming I’m not fighting in a dark cave, I guess.”

“I can imagine your confusion. A simple light certainly cannot help one smite one’s enemies. I encourage you to open your mind to the possibilities.”

“What possibilities, exactly?”

“Think of it this way. You presume the object of a fight is to win, yes?”

“Well, yeah. If I lose, then I might even die.”

Any monster would try to kill me, no doubt. Technically they would want to eat me, but since being eaten is generally fatal, the result would be the same either way. If I wanted to survive, I had to fight and win. Fighting other people might be different, since they might not want to kill me, but it could spell trouble either way.

“To put it bluntly, you’re wrong,” he said flatly. “There are certainly times at which one must win—but in combat as a whole, you must simply *avoid losing*.”

“How is that any different from winning, though?” I asked, not getting it.

“Well, let us think of an example. Let’s presume you were assaulted by a monster in an open field. Miss Leo is elsewhere; you’re utterly alone.”

“Okay.”

I took a moment to picture it.

“Now imagine that no sword technique you possess will allow you to land a decisive blow. What do you do?”

“Well, first I’d think of why I can’t hit it, and how I can change that,” I said.

“I see. That is indeed a valid approach. But should you fail in everything you attempt, you are bound to lose.”

“Yeah... That makes sense.”

If I couldn’t kill it, then I’d die for sure.

“There is, however, a way to avoid losing under such circumstances. You *run away*.”

“I run?” I repeated.

“If you can escape, then your life may well be spared.”

“Huh... Running away...”

I was so caught up on winning that I was convinced anything else would mean death. There was only win or lose, nothing in between.

Man, I’ve gotta loosen up my thought process a bit.

“But as you can imagine, most opponents would pursue you,” Sebastian continued.

“Yeah, I bet.”

If they wanted to attack me so badly, they wouldn’t give up easily. If anything, they’d push harder as soon as I turned tail to run, and if I couldn’t outrun them, that would be the end of me.

“I recommend this spell for just such a time. Light Elemental Shine!” As he finished his incantation, an orb of light appeared in his hands. “In the forest we needed a torch, so I had the light envelop a sword. Ordinarily, however, it takes the form of an orb. It has no effect aside from emitting light.”

“Yeah... Okay.”

It was bright enough that I had to flinch away for a second, but now that I could get a closer look, it was harmless. My fingers passed right through when I reached out to touch it, even. I couldn’t even feel any heat from it.

“You may create it as an orb, or channel it through your sword. In either case, your objective is to make your opponent recoil.”

“And then, while they’re looking away, I run?” I guessed.

“Precisely. When confronted with a sudden light such as this, humans and monsters alike will stop, assuming that something worse is yet to come. In your case, however, it gives you the optimal opening to flee. Also, it would benefit you to remember that most opponents will be relying on their sense of sight to track you.”

“Yeah, definitely.”

Some people or monsters might be able to feel my presence or something, but sight always came first. There were probably a few exceptions, but that was almost universally true.

“When I created this light, what was your first impression?” he asked.

“Well... It was really bright. I got blinded for a moment.”

“Exactly. If only momentarily, you can blind your opponent. As it is still the middle of the day and we’re in the garden, it might not have seemed so bad, but imagine what would happen if you were to use this spell in a dark room.”

“It’d be way too bright to even move.”

Especially adding in how sudden it was, most people would get caught totally off-guard.

A surprise attack, huh?

“With only this simple spell, you can create an opening with which to flee. If you run well, you can live to fight another day,” he said sagely.

“Thank you so much for this lesson. I really was focused on just winning, huh?”

“As a student of the sword, it’s only natural that you would consider it your primary option. I thought it prudent to remind you of your alternatives.”

Sebastian was right about that. Eckenhart had taught me that if I was scared, then I couldn’t hit anything. If I wanted to win, I had to commit myself fully and

bring about my full force of will. After all, if I was afraid to fight, nobody would take me seriously.

“As this is one of the fundamentals of magic, it shouldn’t pose a challenge. Repeat after me: Light Elemental Shine!”

“Okay. Light Elemental Shine!” I tried to copy his words as best I could, but nothing happened. “Huh... What went wrong?”

Where’s my orb of light? It worked for Sebastian just fine.

“Why, you simply said the words. An incantation holds no power unless you weave mana into it, after all.”

“Mana?”

I knew I had mana, but I didn’t have the faintest idea how to put it to use.

I’m not exactly used to casting spells, after all.

He stroked his chin. “Mana is an inherent energy that all humans share, but I suppose if you’ve never made proper contact with it before, it would be hard to use.”

“Yeah... I’m totally lost,” I admitted.

“In that case, let’s start by learning how to channel mana. This spell should be ideal for practice, in fact, as it’s simple and very low-cost.”

That makes sense. He did say it was a beginner spell, after all.

“First, close your eyes,” he instructed. “Focus on your breathing.”

“Okay.” I did as I was told, feeling every breath as it entered and left my lungs.

“Now, slowly focus your attention on the rest of your body. Do you feel any warmth? In or near your heart, perhaps?”

“Warmth...” I squeezed my eyes tighter as I tried to envision it. Slowly but surely, I could feel little pockets of warmth pop up, first over my heart but then all over the place. “I think I can feel it.”

“That, Mr. Hirooka, is mana. As it is constantly flowing throughout your body, it is important to get a feel for it.”

“Okay.”

I’d never felt anything like it back in my old world. It had a very different feel from my regular body heat.

“Now, don’t forget this sensation,” Sebastian said. “You must now gently guide the mana through your body and toward the place where you wish to activate it. As everyone envisions this process differently, I encourage you to find whatever works best for you.”

“Let me try it out.”

Let’s see... If I want to make one of those orbs, I guess my right hand would be best. Now to just nudge it along... Hey, I think I can feel it moving. My hand’s getting warmer. It kind of feels like tracing the blood as it goes through my vessels, even though I know it’s not traveling like that. Maybe this is just the easiest way for me to picture it?

“I think I have the mana in my hand now,” I finally said.

“My, that was quick. You may have a knack for it. Now envision the mana escaping your palm as you say the incantation.”

“All right... Light Elemental Shine!”

With that, I imagined pushing the mana out. As the warm sensation floated up and out of my body, an orb of light appeared in my hand.



“L-Look... I did it!”

“Splendid! That was even faster than I’d thought.”

It was hard to look at the orb since it was so bright, but I couldn’t help but stare. I wanted to take Sebastian by the hand and jump for joy.

Not that I’d actually do that, of course.

“Now, as we have precious little time before your departure, I’m afraid there’s little else I would be able to teach you. However, with the fundamentals now within your grasp, you should be able to cast several spells.”

“Really? I can?”

I wonder what options there are? What about that fire spell Leo uses to light fires? Oh, and there was also that water magic Sebastian used to wash the pans when we were camping.

The possibilities seemed endless, and I couldn’t help but get excited.

“I can cast magic, too...!”

“Of course. You have a decent amount of mana, so should you put effort into it, I imagine you could cast most anything you desire.”

I remembered the words of the old woman at the magic shop in Ractos.

I wonder if I’ll eventually be able to cast combat spells too? Although, I guess I won’t be learning voiceless incantations anytime soon.

“Mana can have any number of effects depending on the incantation used,” Sebastian explained. “However, as you will need to memorize the pronunciation and amount of mana consumed, as well as other critical details, you shan’t be able to cast most without studying further.”

“Honestly, I’m just happy I could cast anything,” I said truthfully.

Any spell that would require more mana would take that much more practice to use. I’d also have to study quite a bit if I wanted to learn more incantations.

I guess this spell was just that easy, huh?

“By the time you leave for Lange, I hope you will be able to cast this spell

without any marked delay. We'll focus on quickly gathering the required mana and your enunciation so that you can cast it when and if you need to."

"Yeah, that makes sense. I'm still not used to this feeling at all, so I bet I'd take forever to cast it again," I said.

That would be fine if I wasn't under any pressure, but if I needed to use this spell to run away in a pinch, I'd need to be able to use it on the fly.

Sebastian and I practiced together until dinner, while he gave me all manner of tips on how to cast more efficiently. Since I was still riding the high of casting magic for the first time, I didn't feel tired at all.

"Mr. Hirooka, dinner is ready," Laila came out to tell us. "Could you please go to the dining room?"

"Of course."

Just as I turned to go inside, however, Sebastian stopped me. "Ah, Mr. Hirooka? A moment?"

"What is it?"

Is there anything else he has to teach me first?

"I realize that this is wholly unconnected to your magic studies, but there is a rather pressing matter I must discuss with you regarding the herb sales in Ractos."

Apparently, it was about capwort's selling price. Claire had talked to him about making it cheaper so that it was more affordable to the masses. I could tell he wasn't a fan of the idea from the way he bunched up his eyebrows, though. They were basically suggesting we operated at a loss for a while.

If this will help people, though, I don't mind making a little less.

"In that case, Sebastian, you can just not pay me for the capwort at all. You can keep all the profits for yourselves."

He blinked in surprise. "Wh-Why, we couldn't possibly! Simply accommodating you as we have been yields plenty of profit for us, so I'm afraid I can't condone your lack of compensation."

“Don’t worry, you’re already paying me tons for the other herbs.”

Lowering the selling price would have a direct impact on Kales’s operation, after all, and I didn’t know if he’d agree to lose money that way. If he gained a little extra income from my share, however, he’d probably be even more invested in his capwort sales. I counted any blow against Yugard’s operations as a win. Besides, while I had nothing against saving up a ton of money, I didn’t have anything I wanted to buy right now, so it wouldn’t hurt me if I made less for a while.

“No, I’m afraid that’s not possible,” Sebastian insisted. “After all, it would explicitly violate the contract that you signed with us. On my pride as a Libert butler, I *cannot* allow it!”

“Your pride, huh?”

He probably had to keep quite a few plates spinning at once as a butler, and I could tell I’d never convince him otherwise.

“How about you just lower my share as much as you can?” I suggested. “That wouldn’t violate the contract, then.”

“I... I suppose so. That would certainly be better, but—”

“No more buts,” I said firmly. “I mean, isn’t this only temporary, anyways? Things will go back to normal soon enough.”

If I don’t assert myself a little here, this’ll keep dragging on forever.

Finally, Sebastian bowed deeply. “If you insist. My deepest apologies for raising this most unpleasant topic in the first place.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I smiled. “It’s not like I’m having money troubles. If anything, my biggest trouble is I have too *much* money and nothing to do with it.”

Since they didn’t have banks in this world, my room was slowly filling up with bags of coins with nowhere to go. Besides, it wouldn’t be Sebastian’s fault, no matter how much or how little money I decided to accept.

I gave him a tap on the shoulder, and we headed into the dining hall together. When we arrived, Tilura looked downright sick of waiting for us, and both Leo

and Cherie were fidgeting impatiently.

“You’re sooo slow, Takumi!” Tilura cried.

“Bark!”

“Arf!”

“Sorry, everyone. I had to talk to Sebastian about something first.”

I bet they’re both pretty hungry by now.

“Is something wrong?” Claire asked.

“No, nothing like that. Sebastian will tell you everything later, I’m sure,” I said.

“Allow me to explain,” Sebastian cut in. “I was simply having a word with him about the capwort prices.”

“Oh, that.” Claire nodded understandingly. “I’ll hear the details from you later.”

I could tell she was curious, but dinner came first. It’d probably take a while to fill her in on everything, and the kids had waited long enough.

Er, I guess Leo’s not a kid, but still.

“Let’s eat, then,” Claire suggested.

“Okay!”

“Ruff, ruff!”

“Arf!”

“Thanks for the food.”

With that, all five of us started eating. Tilura and the dogs all dug into their food with gusto. Claire opened her mouth to warn them but decided against it. I smiled a little at her expression as I dug into Helena’s cooking myself.

Tilura eats just like Eckenhart, huh? I guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.

As we finished dinner and moved on to our post-meal tea, Claire asked me about the events of the afternoon. “You were learning magic from Sebastian, weren’t you? How did it go?”

“Well, it was pretty tricky at first, but I think I have a handle on the basics now,” I said.

“Mr. Hirooka is quite the talent,” Sebastian boasted. “Why, I daresay he’s a natural.”

I looked at him in surprise. “Really?”

It took me a few tries just to get anything to happen when I said the incantation, and I’d never even felt mana before then. Though I vaguely remembered him saying something similar before, I still found it hard to believe.

“You have a knack for detecting mana. Most students struggle to feel it in any capacity, and developing a feel for mana is one of the most critical aspects. Why, I remember when milady was learning...”

Huh... I had no idea it was that important.

“S-Sebastian?” Claire’s face flushed slightly. “You don’t need to bring that up now.”

“How many years ago was that, now?” he continued, clearly ignoring her. “She struggled to understand my explanations and had even convinced herself she had no mana at all!”

I could tell that Sebastian was in the mood to have a little fun. Normally I would’ve sided with Claire, but I was too curious to stop him.

I leaned in a little. “So, what happened next?”

“She ran crying to His Grace, in fact. He had quite a hard time consoling her. And, I’ll remind you, no living human is devoid of mana!”

“I-I didn’t know back then!” Claire said.

“Sounds like she was a pretty cute kid,” I grinned.

I remember hearing that mana is like lifeblood. I could imagine Claire running to Eckenhart and kicking up a huge fuss over it now.

Maybe she’s embarrassed to hear about it again, but I’m glad I got to know a little more about her past.



“I guess Claire was a kid once, too.”

I had just finished taking a bath after the evening’s practice swings, and I was thinking back to the conversation we’d had after dinner as I sat on my bed. She seemed so knowledgeable and mature now, so it was honestly a little hard to imagine she was that kind of kid.

“Come to think of it, there was that arranged marriage misunderstanding, too.”

After hearing the founding head of the family had an arranged marriage, she’d insisted on having one, too.

She’s always been the kind to spring into action whenever she gets an idea... That’s another way Tilura’s like her.

“Ruff?” Leo plodded up to me, sniffing inquisitively.

“Hm? What’s up, Leo?”

“Woof!” She started licking my face all over.

“H-Hey! Cut that out!” I pushed her back a little and started vigorously scratching her head. “Oh, I get it. You wanna play, huh?”

“Ruff, ruff!” She nodded.

“I guess I haven’t been spending a lot of time with you lately, have I?”

“Woo-woo!” *Yeah, that’s right!* She seemed to be saying.

Between training with Tilura and studying with Milicia, the only real playing I’d been doing with her lately was trying to land a hit on her during training, and that wasn’t quite the same. She probably missed having one-on-one time with me.

It’s a little late, sure, but I’ve got time to play with her now.

“All right, let’s burn off some of your energy!”

“Roooooo!” She started wagging energetically.

Oh, boy. I can already tell I’ll be sore in the morning.

I wouldn't have much free time before we left for Lange in two days' time, and I was relying on her to get me there, so it was only fair I give her the attention she wanted now.

"All right, here come the ear scratches! Who's a good girl?!"

"Ruff, ruff...!"

I reached behind her ears and started rubbing hard with both hands. I was able to just use my fingers back when she was tiny, but she probably couldn't even feel that now. She seemed to like my massage, though, and she blissfully rested her giant head on my lap.

"Okay, now to change it up a little."

"Woff?"

I made my way around to her flanks and started mussing up the silky fur where her forelegs met her torso. Every once in a while, I'd grab her thick, loose skin with both hands and give it a strong tug. By human standards, it was the equivalent of a thorough shoulder massage.

Leo let out an especially contented sigh, wagging her tail slowly as I worked. What with all the running she'd been doing lately, her joints probably had a knot or two to work out.

"Haha, you enjoying it?"

"Wuff, woff..."

I continued massaging her. I was cuddling her more than playing with her, but not at all like I did back in Japan. I used to pick her up and let her softly nibble my fingers, and while I trusted that Leo was still a soft nibbler, I didn't have the guts to risk it.

After a while, I stood up in front of her and stretched out my hand. "Okay, Leo. You ready?"

"Woof!"

She seemed to know what would come next, so she stood up and got ready.

"Sit!"

“Ruff!”

I made hand gestures along with my commands, and she obediently followed along.

“Lie down!”

“Ruff-ruff!”

“Sit! Now beg!”

“Wuff, woof, awooo!”

She first sat up, then daintily raised her forepaws off the ground.



I didn't encourage her to beg under normal circumstances, but this was just too cute to resist. The way she moved her forepaws up and down in midair was especially endearing, even at her current size.

She really is huge, huh...? I have to look way up at her now. I'm glad the ceilings here are so high.

"Good girl! Now lie down again!"

"Wooooooo!"

I beamed at her. "Great! Who's a good, good girl, huh? Who remembered all her tricks?!"

"Mroooooooooow!"

I stopped to give her another thorough petting. Normally I'd reward her with a piece of sausage, but I didn't exactly keep any lying around my room, and I felt a little bad for constantly mooching from Helena's pantry. I decided to just give her some extra-thorough pets instead.

"Ready to keep going?"

"Wwuuh-wuu!"

In the end, I stayed up playing with her until late. I considered caring for Leo worth shaving off a few hours of sleep, though. She seemed thoroughly pleased, and she slept half on my bed to give me a fluff pillow for the first time in a while. The last thing I saw as I drifted off to sleep was her happily wagging tail.



"GOOD morning!"

First thing the following morning, Tilura and Cherie came to visit me for the first time in a while. I was still half-asleep, but I managed to half sit up.

"G'morning, Tilura..." I yawned.

"Ruff!"

"Arf!"

Leo, of course, was as energetic as usual.

“Are you tired, Takumi?” she asked.

“Hahaha, no, I’ll be fine. I was playing with Leo last night, so I got to sleep later than usual, that’s all.”

“No wonder Miss Leo’s in such a good mood!”

“Wwuuh-wuu!”

“Arf!”

From the way Leo was already up and wagging her tail like crazy, I could tell she still had plenty of energy. Cherie was yipping and dancing around her legs excitedly.

“I’ll be in for breakfast as soon as I can,” I said as I stood up and stretched. “How about you take the dogs and wait in the dining hall?”

“Okay. Let’s go, Cherie!”

“Arf!”

Tilura picked Cherie up and started walking toward the door. From behind her, Leo tilted her head inquisitively.

“Ruff?”

“Do you want to come too, Miss Leo?”

“Ruff-ruff!”

Huh. It’s not like Leo to choose Tilura over me, but it’s not like it matters either way.

After watching the three of them leave the room, I yawned and got ready for breakfast.

As we ate, Claire noticed the bags under my eyes. “Oh, dear. Are you tired? You haven’t been pushing yourself too hard, have you?”

“No, I’m fine. I just stayed up a little too late last night playing with Leo.”

I’d been trying to hide my tiredness, but somehow, she’d picked up on it anyways.

I'll just have one of those energy herbs after breakfast.

The first thing we did after breakfast, though, was confirm our plans.

"You'll be leaving for Lange tomorrow, won't you?" she asked.

"That's the plan. I'll grow as much capwort as I can today and leave with Leo tomorrow morning."

"Okay. I realize that there's very little I can do to help you except thank you for your efforts," she said.

"I'm the only one who can grow herbs on such short notice, after all. Besides, I'm honestly just glad I can be of use to you. You and Sebastian can just focus on the Yugard store."

"Of course. I'll also do what I can to prevent the illness from spreading further than it already has. Unfortunately, if we're any more blatant with our current messaging, people might accuse us of drumming up business for the Libert stores unfairly."

Claire and Sebastian were the only ones who could keep the Yugard store under control, but as she said, she couldn't exactly order people to only shop at Kales's. That would only incite the local merchants, even if it would help manage the epidemic.

As we finished talking and I headed out into the garden, Claire stopped me. "Oh, and one more thing about the capwort's price change..."

She proceeded to apologize again that I was taking the brunt of the burden, but I just laughed it off.

Getting paid less was my idea, after all. I appreciate the thought, but she shouldn't worry about it that much.



"ALL right, I guess it's time to push myself just a *little* bit."

After gulping down an energy herb and wrapping up my morning training, I was ready to get cultivating.

Laila cast me a worried look. "Please remember to pace yourself, Mr.

Hirooka.”

One glance at Milicia was enough to tell me she was just as worried.

She heard about how I fainted, eh?

“Don’t worry,” I reassured them both. “Recently, I’ve started to get a feel for my limits, and I’m nowhere close to that right now.”

Laila didn’t seem quite convinced, but she nodded anyways. “If you say so. But please don’t faint again.”

“I won’t. Thanks for caring, though.”

With that, Milicia and I went to our usual cultivation corner.

This place is basically my workshop now, huh? Not that there’s anything wrong with that, since I have Claire’s permission and everything.

Since I had been cultivating so many herbs, I was getting a better idea of my limits, but I left out that I had no idea what my exact maximum was. The most important thing right now was just sheer volume, which considering how easy capwort was to make, probably wouldn’t be putting me in any danger, even with the impending price change.

“Okay, Milicia, let’s get cracking,” I said.

“Of course, Master!”

As I worked away growing herbs, I had Milicia handle all the little odd jobs. Fortunately, I was used to every part of the process, from the growing to the picking, and I was able to make much better time than I had at first.



AFTER a while of concentrated work, Laila stopped me.

“Perhaps that’s enough for today? You’ve grown an awful lot,” she said.

“Really?” I wiped the sweat off my brow. “I was hoping to make a bit more, but I guess taking a short break can’t hurt. By the way, Milicia, nice work so far.”

“Oh, no. I’m nothing compared to you, Master.”

Laila brought us some tea, and we sat and relaxed for a while.

“Right,” I suddenly remembered. “I almost forgot I have magic lessons.”

Milicia’s eyes widened. “You can cast magic, too?!”

“Not really. I just started, so I only really know the basics.”

“A Gift, Miss Leo, swords, and now magic... You’re so amazing, Master!”

I just happened to adopt Leo out of sheer luck, though, and I had no clue where my Gift was from. I also wasn’t exactly well-versed in either swordplay or spellcraft, so I really didn’t feel worthy of Milicia’s adoration.

I mean, anyone can cast magic with a little practice, right?

I drained my cup and let out a contented sigh. “Thanks for the tea, Laila.”

Laila bowed. “My pleasure.”

Milicia looked over at her. “You’re amazing, too... I wish I could make tea this good.”

I hadn’t had a single cup of tea yet that didn’t taste wonderful, and I wasn’t surprised Milicia aspired to make the perfect cup too. I had no idea how they did it, but something about the flavor always put me at ease. It had to be on par with my relaxation herbs.

Or maybe it’s just a psychological thing? Good for me either way, I guess.

Laila smiled softly at her. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure to teach you when the time comes.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it!”

“The process itself is quite simple,” Laila continued. “The trick lies in the feelings you put into it.”

“The feelings?” Milicia asked.

Laila gave a simple explanation of how to prepare tea. From the way she talked, I could tell she spared no effort to make it taste good, and her thoughts were always with the drinker. She even changed the strength of the tea to reflect the drinker’s physical and mental state. As I listened, I watched Tilura train and Cherie and Leo play together, determined to squeeze every drop of enjoyment out of my break.

As soon as Laila had finished talking, I stood up and stretched. “I guess I should do a bit of magic practice first.”

“You don’t want to make more herbs?” Milicia asked.

“Not now. My Gift only gets me in trouble if I use it nonstop for long periods of time, but just in case, I’ll take a bit more of a break. Sorry, you won’t have much to do for a while.”

“No, it’s fine. I wanted to watch you use magic, anyways,” Milicia said.

As I chatted with her, I thought back on Sebastian’s lecture from the day before. I focused inward, finding the strange little spots of warmth inside me, and guided them softly toward my hand.

“Light Elemental Shine,” I chanted. With that, a shining ball of light appeared in my hand. “Nice, it still works.”

“That’s really bright,” Milicia said, squinting. “It has to be as bright as you are!”

I laughed nervously. “Haha... It’s literally all I can do, though.”

I practiced going over the process a few more times, both finding my internal mana and working on pronouncing the incantation correctly. With a little more experimenting, I figured out that I could control the brightness of the light by changing how much mana I put into it. It could easily become even more useful than I thought, then.

After that, I kept practicing. To sum things up, I could produce a very weak light extremely quickly if I used just a little mana. Also, because Shine was so quick and easy to use, I got the hang of moving the mana as I said the incantation. I could probably create a brief opening with it in a fight, and if I got a little more used to it, I’d be able to catch the enemy totally off-guard with it. The more I experimented with it, the better I understood why Sebastian taught me this spell specifically.

Gelda came out to call us for lunch at about noon, but my thoughts were still full of magic as I walked. Milicia seemed to find magic of any kind to be new and fascinating, and she stuck with me the entire time without getting bored once.



AS we ate, Claire watched me with a worried look in her eyes. “What are your plans for after lunch?” she finally asked.

“I’m going to make a few more herbs. I still haven’t grown as many as I’d like.”

“You’re positive you aren’t pushing yourself too hard?”

“Oh, it’s probably fine. I don’t know exactly what my limit is, but I took a nice long break this morning to practice magic. I should have plenty of energy left for this afternoon.”

I still didn’t know what energy my Gift ran on, but since it seemed to regenerate over time, I could probably get right back to it between my tea break and the magic practice.

I hope it doesn’t only recover when I’m sleeping... I might be screwed, then. I guess I’ll just cross my fingers and hope I don’t pass out.

Sebastian nodded sagely. “I imagine you should have ample energy for this afternoon, yes.”

He had come to a meal for the first time in ages. His investigation of the Yugard store was no doubt keeping him busy, but it looked like he’d finally made enough progress to take a little break.

Or maybe he’s made so little progress there’s no point obsessing over it now?

After lunch was over, I got ready to continue growing herbs.

“I don’t want to see you faint again,” Claire cautioned me. “Promise you’ll be extra careful.”

“Don’t worry, I will be.” I gave her a reassuring smile before heading back out again.

Milicia wasn’t with me this time since she was learning from some of the servants.

I hope she learns how to make tea soon, just like she was hoping.

“Okay. I can do this alone,” I said, trying to give myself a pep talk.

Laila stepped forward. “Please allow me to assist you.”

“Really? You’d do that?”

She makes us tea, she watches over us... Honestly, I feel bad for making her work this hard.

“Please, order us around to your hearts’ content,” Laila urged. “Serving the members of this household is what we are here for, after all.”

“No, I couldn’t. I’d feel way too guilty.”

Having butlers and maids around still felt alien to me, but Laila herself was insisting.

Maybe I should let them do a little more for me? Not enough to give them any trouble, of course, but I don’t want to turn her down if she’s that determined to help.

“Um... Can you help me, then?” I asked.

“I would be honored to.”

I asked her to harvest the herbs and collect them by variety. Tilura was inside studying, and both Leo and Cherie were napping in the sun, so we were able to focus and make solid progress.

“Do you suppose this is enough?” she asked worriedly as the sun slowly began to set.

“Hmm... Not quite.” I shook my head. “I’ve got to make a little more for Ractos, and ideally some extra capwort for Lange, too.”

After all, I need to make sure Ractos doesn’t run short while I’m away. I can make capwort anytime along the way.

“You seem awfully tired,” she pressed. “Please, rest.”

“I really look that bad, huh? Sorry. I guess we can take a break now.”

Finally I caved, and Laila went off to make tea.

Is it just me, or is she happy right now?

She had to be at least as tired as I was, though, and I bet her back was starting to hurt like mine was. I wasn’t feeling physically drained, per se, but the amount of stooping I’d been doing was taking its toll.

“Please, help yourself and relax,” she said as she handed me a teacup on a saucer.

“Thanks.” I stretched my back a little as I sat on one of the patio chairs. “Why don’t you rest, too?”

“No, I’m afraid I—”

“You’ve been helping me for so long, and I made more progress than I hoped, thanks to you. Besides, you’ve got to be tired by now. Sit down, I insist.” I stood up and nudged her toward a chair.

She gave me a dubious look but finally ceded. “If you say so.” Laila sat down across from me, and I could hear her sigh a little as she took a sip of tea.

I knew she was exhausted.

I was grateful for what she’d done, but I also felt a distinct pang of guilt.

“Come to think of it, this is probably the first time I’ve seen you sit down and relax,” I commented.

“Of course. No maid would dare take a seat at the same table as either their mistress or an honored guest.”

Maybe that was common sense for a servant, but it didn’t quite click for me. Relaxing might be against whatever servants’ code she and the others followed, but I couldn’t be at ease with her hovering behind me.

“Well, why don’t we make this a habit?” I suggested. “It doesn’t have to be all the time, but at least when we’re alone like this, I want to drink with you.”

“I suppose I should refuse, but... If you’re certain you won’t find it offensive...”

I couldn’t imagine her agreeing to sit with Claire, but I wasn’t a noble by any stretch. With any luck, she’d grow a bit more comfortable around me.

With that, we relaxed together and enjoyed the late afternoon air.



WE continued working after our short break, and by the time Gelda came to call us for dinner, I’d grown all the herbs I was hoping to. I felt a little bad for worrying Laila, but I now had plenty of capwort for Lange. After thanking her for

her help, I ate dinner and headed back into the garden for some sword practice.

“So, you’re going tomorrow, huh?” Tilura mumbled sadly as she stopped swinging beside me.

“Yep. I don’t plan to be back for at least a few days.”

“That sucks... We’ve been together so much lately. I’ll really miss you and Miss Leo.”

“I’ll miss you too...”

Since it would take about a day each way, plus at least a day in the village itself to distribute the herbs, I was expecting to be gone for three days. Depending on how things went, though, I could easily spend an extra day or two there.

“Make sure to keep practicing and studying while we’re gone,” I joked.

“I won’t slack off!” she exclaimed loudly. “I’ll do so good that when you get back, you won’t believe how good I’ve gotten!”

“That’s the spirit. You’d better be ready to let me have it when I get back.” I grinned.

“I will!”

I doubted that she would advance all that much while I was gone, but she was a hard worker and still growing. I wouldn’t be surprised if she advanced by leaps and bounds.

What’s that they say about kids growing up too fast? I’ll have to stay on my game.

We finished our evening training without saying much else. As I was about to head in, though, she stopped me.

“Takumi? Can I sleep in your room tonight?”

Leo tilted her head to the side. “Wuff?”

“Uh... Why don’t you get Claire’s permission first, and then we’ll talk?”

I understood that she was going to be lonely, and I wasn’t going to try anything weird, but I didn’t want to take a risk by just letting her sleep in my

room at night. There was probably some protocol or noble code about this kind of thing, and I didn't feel comfortable just giving her the OK.

There's no way Claire will agree to it, though, so it looks like I'll be safe.

Tilura nodded excitedly at me. "Okay! I'll go ask her right now!"

As she ran off into the house, however, a strange sense of foreboding overcame me.

I'm going to regret this, aren't I?



"I knew I was going to regret it..." I sighed. "How did it come to this?!"

I took a quick bath and got ready for bed, but by the time I'd returned to my room, it was occupied not only by Tilura but also Claire, Laila, Cherie, and even Milicia.

"Is something the matter, Takumi?" Claire asked.

"N-No. Nothing."

They were all dressed in nightgowns, and I was having a hard time getting my eyes to behave.

Sure, I bet they're easy to sleep in, but I swear this is poisoning my brain.

Leo shook her head and sighed at me. "Fwuff."

"C-C'mon, Leo, you know this isn't my fault."

Milicia looked at me curiously. "What did Miss Leo say?"

"Uh... Nothing. Just forget about it," I laughed dryly.

"Oh, that reminds me." Claire handed me a folded piece of paper. "Sebastian told me to give this to you. What does it say?"

"He did? Let's see..."

I flipped it open.

It says: "I've gathered the mansion's greatest beauties for you. Sweet dreams, good sir." That perverted, meddling old coot!

“Takumi?” Claire called my name again.

“Nothing. It says nothing at all. Uh... It’s herb stuff. Forget about it. Haha.” I hurriedly crumpled it up and threw it away.

Man, am I glad Claire didn’t read it. He knows I don’t have the guts to turn them out now, doesn’t he? I bet he’s having a good laugh about this.

Is he sure he wants to put Claire in a situation like this, though? I’m not going to do anything to her, of course, but he should probably look out for her more. Or what, is this his idea of a joke? I’m not laughing.

“I know this must be quite the burden on you,” Claire apologized, “but I feel so lonely whenever I remember you’ll be gone after tonight.”

“Thanks, Claire... But maybe this is a little much?”

I was honestly happy to hear I’d be missed, but calling the young women of the mansion to spend the night...er, stay in a guy’s room was a little too much.

“Think of this as your going-away party,” Claire pressed. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Well, I mean... If you’re all okay with it, I guess it’ll be fine?” I hesitated.

That’s right, this is a going-away party, that’s all. There’s nothing more to this. Nothing more at all! Hear me, stupid guy brain?!

Claire smiled and leaned in toward Laila to whisper, “I did it! He agreed!”

Laila shook her head slightly and whispered back, “Try to restrain yourself, milady. He’ll think you’re strange.”

“But I can finally spend the night in his room now! How am I supposed to remain calm?!”

“I understand full well that this is important to you, but you mustn’t forget that Lady Tilura is here as well.”

“Oh, I know. After all, Sebastian only allowed it because you’re here to watch us. He was laughing quite hard, though, wasn’t he?”

“Knowing him, I’d have expected nothing less.”

I could barely hear them, but it looked like Claire was happy, so that was good

enough for me.

They're not talking about me, though, right? I'm pretty sure I heard Sebastian's name come up, too.

"Uh... Claire? Laila?" I addressed them, finding the mood awkward.

Claire immediately stiffened up, face reddening. "Y-Yes?!"

Laila bowed slightly, perfectly composed. "Our apologies for excluding you from our conversation."

"No, it's not that big a deal. What were you talking about, though?"

Laila thought for a moment. "Milady was telling me how she's been awaiting this night for ages."

Claire turned a shade redder. "L-Laila!"

I blinked in surprise. "Really? It's just my room. You probably have dozens just like it."

"Forget I said anything," Laila said with the faintest of smiles.

They weren't talking about anything embarrassing, were they? The only thing I can think of that Claire would be looking forward to here would be spending the night with me... Nah, that can't be it.

She had to be referring to everyone being together, like a slumber party.

I mean, I love spending time with her like this, but I can't dwell on it too much, or stuff might happen.

"A-Anyhow, onto the next problem... Where's everyone going to sleep?" I asked.

"I wanna sleep with Miss Leo!"

"C-Can I sleep with her too, Master?"

"Ruff, ruff!"

"Arf!"

Milicia, Tilura, and Cherie were already nestled in Leo's fluff, and they seemed content to stay there.

That's fine with me.

"I-I want to sleep here!" Claire announced.

"If I may, I should like to stay here as well," Laila echoed.

Uh-oh. That's not fine.

"Um... Why do you both want to sleep on my bed?"

Claire cast Leo a sheepish glance. "Well, there isn't enough room on Miss Leo for all of us."

Laila nodded. "If you'd prefer, I could sleep alone on the *cold, hard* floor instead."

The bed was large enough that it could probably accommodate all three of us just fine, and unless one of us was especially restless, we wouldn't even touch each other. Sleeping with not one but two women, however, couldn't be good for my mental health—*especially* if one of those women was Claire.

They're pretending to be coy about it, too...

Tilura looked up at Claire curiously. "You're gonna *sleep* with Takumi?"

"Y-Yes, I am." She was trying to be casual about it, but her cheeks turned redder than I'd ever seen them. "There's nowhere else to sleep, after all!"

Is...is it normal for noblewomen in this world to share beds with commoners?

Claire turned to Laila. "Isn't that right, Laila?"

Laila looked directly at the bed. "Don't mind me. I could still sleep on the floor."

I smiled awkwardly. "Okay... Looks like you both really want the bed."

Clearly, neither of them would be taking no for an answer.

I let out a sigh. "You two win, then. You take the bed, and *I'll* sleep on the floor. Wanna snuggle up with me, Cherie?"

"Arf!"

Cherie ran over to me, and I scooped her up to carry her to the far corner of the room. Cherie would be plenty warm enough on a warm night like this, and

my pride as a man wouldn't let me force a woman to sleep on the floor.

Claire's expression turned to horror. "Y-You can't do that, Takumi! That defeats the whole purpose!"

Laila narrowed her eyes slightly. "If you're determined to sleep on the floor, I suppose I should subject myself to a cold night on the ground as well."

I looked up at them in shock. "Huh? But... You know I can't just share a bed with you two, right?"

"Yes, you can!" Claire stomped her foot. "I-It'll only be for tonight!"

Together, Claire and Laila grabbed me by the arms and hauled me onto the bed.

Well, uh... This is an unexpected turn.

"Takumi will sleep in the middle, I'll sleep on his left by the wall, and Laila, you can sleep on his other side."

"As you will, milady."

"U-Uh... Do I get any say in this?"

Leo shook her head disappointedly and let out another sigh. "Hruff-ruff."

I didn't have the time to make excuses to Leo, though.

I don't have any real problem sleeping between two beautiful women, especially since Claire's one of them, but at this rate, I'll be way too nervous to get a wink of sleep. I mean, just one look at the way Claire's blushing is enough to send my heart racing like crazy.

Leo and the girls, as an aside, were already in position. They each lay down on either side of Leo.

Tilura raised her head to ask. "You're okay with this, right, Miss Leo?"

"Wooo-wooo!"

Milicia chuckled. "She seems to be fine with it, Lady Tilura."

With a fluffy pillow like Leo, I bet they'll both sleep great.

"I-I think we can just let Leo worry about them," Claire suggested.

Great. Now I just have to worry about me. I can't start my trip tomorrow feeling exhausted...

"Hold on a moment. I need to grab something," I said.

Claire and Laila both pulled away from me a little.

"Is something the matter?"

"Anything I can get for you?" Laila asked.

I slid past Laila off the bed and went to my desk in the corner of the room to grab a small pouch resting on top of it. Behind me, I could hear the two of them start whispering again.

"Do you think he doesn't want to sleep with me?" Claire asked worriedly.

"No, I don't believe so. If anything, he seemed on the verge of losing all control."

My focus, however, was on the pouch.

"YES! I knew I had some sleeping violet left."

I wasted no time in gulping down the herb. Back in the forest, I'd used it to make sure I always got a good night's sleep. Now, it should help me get a decent rest, even with Claire right beside me the whole night. The last thing I wanted was to sleep in and start my journey on the wrong foot.

"Takumi?" Claire asked from the bed.

"Is something the matter, Mr. Hirooka?"

"No, it's nothing! Haha, I'm fine. Just fine."

It would've been embarrassing if they knew I was so uneasy, so I just laughed them off. The sleeping herb was already starting to take effect, so I crawled right into bed, and the two of them lay down on either side of me just like they said they would. The thought of being so close to Claire made my heart flutter again, and I tried to calm down by taking a few deep breaths as quietly as I could.

Nope, it's not working! Did she just take a bath or something? She smells way too good!

“Sweet dreams!” Claire giggled.

“I hope you rest well,” Laila said.

“Um...thanks.”

Since I was less likely to fall asleep the more I thought about Claire, I rolled over onto my back and clamped my eyes shut. I was a little nervous Claire could still hear my heart racing—especially since she was so *close*—but I tried not to think about it as the herb carried me off to sleep.

I'm so glad I kept a few of those herbs... I just hope I get a decent night's sleep.



“**WELL**, it appears Mr. Hirooka enjoyed himself!”

“I don’t know... Master didn’t seem to want to sleep with them at all...”

“But we had fun sleeping together, right, Miss Leo?”

“Ruffa.”

I could faintly hear people talking as I woke up. Milicia and Tilura’s voices were easy enough to make out, and Leo sounded like she was hungry.

But that first voice... Was that Sebastian? I thought I was sleeping with Claire and Laila, not him...

“Hngh...?” I drowsily opened my eyes to find Sebastian there at the foot of my bed, just as I’d thought.

“Ah, you’re awake. I see you slept well?”

Looking around, I saw Tilura, Milicia, and Leo were with him.

“Good morning, Takumi!”

“Good morning, Master.”

“Uh... Good morning, Sebastian? Morning, Tilura, Milicia... G’morning, Leo,” I said sleepily.

From the look of it, they’d all slept well.

Why can’t I move, though?

Sebastian smiled slyly. “I must admit, though, I am somewhat surprised. Milady is more aggressive than I’d given her credit for.”

“What’re you... Hm?” I froze.

Wait, what smells so good? This can’t be my smell.

I slowly turned, and my confusion turned to horror.

“Whoa! C-Claire?!”

She was right beside me and had her arms wrapped tightly around me.

“Hngh...”

Sebastian chuckled. “A rather interesting night it was, indeed.”

I cast a quick glance to my other side to find that Laila was exactly where she was when I went to sleep and had already sat up.

Huh, so this is Claire’s smell. Help.

I could very clearly feel her every curve, and I could very clearly tell that I needed to get out of this situation immediately.

“I-It’s not what you think, Sebastian!” I cried.

He bemusedly raised an eyebrow. “Oh? What am I thinking, now?”

“Yeah, I slept with Claire—er, *in the same bed* as Claire in a totally platonic way! But we were properly spaced out when we went to sleep, honest! There’s nothing else going on! Nothing at all!”

“And what else, precisely, *could* be going on?”

“I-I mean...” I was so busy fumbling for the right words that I almost didn’t realize the sly grin spreading across his face. “...You’re messing with me, aren’t you?”

“Oh, I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean.” He smirked. “I’m always perfectly serious.”

He’s enjoying this, isn’t he?!

“Hm... Sebastian?” Claire mumbled.

o o



Her grip on me loosened, and I saw my chance.

“Hup!” I pulled myself free and swiftly rolled away from her.

“What an admirable display of acrobatics, Mr. Hirooka! I see your training has begun to pay off.”

He’s enjoying this... He’s really enjoying this! He doesn’t even care that Claire’s right in front of him! What happened to all your pride?!

“Morning already...?” Claire sat up and rubbed her eyes. “Oh... G’morning, Takumi.”

“Good morning, Mr. Hirooka,” echoed Laila from my other side.

“Uh... Good morning.”

It sounded like they were both only just waking up, and they hadn’t been following the conversation.

Is Claire not a morning person, either? Like father, like daughter... That’s pretty cute.

“Nngh...hmm?” Claire finally seemed to notice I wasn’t where I was when I’d fallen asleep. “Are you a restless sleeper?”

Her hair’s so beautiful, even first thing in the morning... Wait, what am I thinking? Wake up, Takumi!

Sebastian only chuckled, and I let out a heavy sigh.

You know what, I’m not even going to bother explaining to him. I’ll only wind up in a bigger mess.

Claire, now fully awake, seemed to remember our circumstances and blushed slightly as she got out of bed. “W-Well, um... I’d best head back to my room to get cleaned up. I’ll see you at breakfast.”

“Yeah. See you there.”

I guess she doesn’t want to be seen right after she wakes up... but honestly, that’s not the most embarrassing thing so far.

After teasing me a little more, Sebastian was quick to leave as well.

He's probably still busy. Wait, did he have to come mess with me then? Enjoying the perks of his role, is he? That sly old fox.

"Uh, Milicia? Do you need to get ready?" I asked her.

"I do, but..." She looked up at Leo, and I could tell she wasn't ready to leave the fluff yet.

"Yeah, Miss Leo's too fluffy to go!" Tilura chirped. "I don't wanna go, either!"

They'd been buried in her fur since last night, and I knew exactly how comfy Leo could be. I honestly couldn't blame them.

After hosting the pair for a little longer, they eventually left, finally leaving me alone in the room with Leo.

"All right, time to get dressed. I'd better get my things together for the trip to Lange, too."

"Ruff."

I'd need a few days of clean clothes at least, since I had no intention of wearing the same stuff the whole trip. While I packed my things, I noticed Leo yawn several times.

"Didn't get much sleep, girl?"

"MROOOOOOOOOOOOW..."

Having both Milicia and Tilura clinging to her might've made it hard to rest up fully. I was fine thanks to that sleeping violet, but it seemed Leo wasn't that lucky.

I should've snuck her a leaf or two before I went to bed.

"Ruff, ruff. Wooo. Uwu? Roo."

"Wait, you what?"

I could've sworn she said she was too curious about what I was up to on the bed to sleep.

She was that interested in Claire and me, huh? I wonder why?

"Roff. Mruff... Hruff... whine..." *Just hurry up and get a mate already. You're*

embarrassing.

“Hey now. It’s way too early for me to be thinking about that.”

I didn’t feel ready for a girlfriend, let alone a wife or anything.

“Besides, that’s Claire you’re talking about. Stop being so crude.”

“Whoof,” she harrumphed before curling up on the ground.

I mean, she’s a noble, she’s one of the most interesting people I’ve ever met, and she’s probably the prettiest woman in the world. She can choose anyone she wants, so why would she pick me? Just thinking about it feels disrespectful.

“Woof! Ruff, ruff, ruuuuuff! Rowrf. Woof, bark!”

“Oh c’mon, how should I know why she wanted to sleep in my bed so badly? I’m not a mind reader.”

She was just feeling lonely, like Tilura. It was totally platonic. As for why she was so embarrassed about it... I-I’m sure there was a good reason for it. I mean, Laila was there, too, right? Jeez, maybe if I had more experience with this stuff, I could figure it out...

A glance at the clock told me that I didn’t have the time to waste thinking about it now, though.

If I’m going to make it to Lange today, I’d better get underway.

Chapter 3: Heading for Lange

“I guess I won’t be able to eat Helena’s cooking for a while, huh?” I muttered.

I ignored Leo’s other questions about the night before and headed to the dining hall, where I was eating breakfast. I was so used to the meals at the mansion that I had a hard time imagining what I’d even eat on my trip.

“Fret not, Mr. Hirooka,” Sebastian assured me. “I took the liberty of packing provisions for your trip.”

Yeah, but that’s not the same.

I stopped by my room one last time to make sure I had everything I needed, then took all my bags out to the entrance hall. Claire, Tilura, Milicia, and Cherie were already waiting to see me off.

“Take care, Takumi. I look forward to hearing how it went when you return,” Claire said.

“Bye, Takumi! Bye, Miss Leo! Hurry back soon!” Tilura said perkily.

“Please, Master, make sure everyone recovers.”

“Arf-arf-aaaaarfff!”

As I listened to their goodbyes, I fastened my luggage to Leo’s back in a large, thin blanket just behind her neck.

I didn’t know they had wrapping blankets like these in this world. I thought that was a Japanese thing.

After making sure the pack was securely in place, I climbed onto Leo’s back right behind it. I’d have to cling onto it as we rode, but since I made sure to put my clothes on the outside, it was decently soft.

“Well then, Mr. Hirooka, let us depart,” Sebastian said as he climbed on behind me.

“Wait, you’re coming, too?”

I didn’t hear a thing about this... I would’ve thought he’d be too busy with his investigation to help.

“Regrettably, I will only be accompanying you as far as Ractos. I thought it most efficient to ride with you,” he said.

“Oh, that makes sense.” I gave Leo a pat on the flank. “You okay with the both of us and the luggage, Leo?”

“Woo!”

Sebastian smiled. “Rest assured, I cleared my plans with her last night.”

Wait, when did he do that? When I was growing herbs, maybe?

If Leo said she was okay with it, I didn’t doubt that she’d be just fine.

“All right, everyone. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” I waved goodbye, and everyone in the entrance hall waved back.

“Safe travels!” they called in unison.

With that familiar call at my back, Leo plodded out the front door.

Is it just me, though, or did I hear Claire and Tilura’s voices in there? It makes sense that Milicia joined in, but I wasn’t expecting them to join in with the servants. Or maybe they did it just for kicks?

As I mulled it over, Leo ran out of the mansion’s gate. She was already moving much faster than she had when we were traveling with a carriage.

“My, what speed!” Sebastian exclaimed. “I imagine we should arrive in less than half the time it would take on horseback!”

“Yeah... She’s always had to match the horses’ pace until now. This probably isn’t even the fastest she can go—she just wants to make sure we don’t get shaken off.”

I wonder how fast she could get to Ractos if she were alone?

“Come to think of it... Can I ask you something?” I asked, raising my voice so it could be heard over the wind.

“Of course. How may I be of service?”

“Why are you going to Ractos?”

I’d never seen Sebastian leave the mansion on his own before. Up until now, I’d always seen him leave with someone.

Maybe this is just that big of a deal?

“I need to follow up on the Yugard investigation. You see, I happen to believe in the benefits of personal experience. With any luck, I may be able to glean something from their storefront that I could not discern from within the mansion. The freshness of the information is also valuable, of course.”

“Freshness, huh?”

I could easily imagine the difference between seeing the Yugard store directly and just receiving second-hand reports on it. It was probably similar to how a picture was worth a thousand words. Freshness, though, was something I hadn’t stopped to consider. There weren’t any computers in this world, let alone the internet, so information would naturally take that much longer to travel. Being there in person, then, was probably more valuable than I could imagine.

Of course, even in my old world, the internet didn’t guarantee the best information... There’s a good share of made-up nonsense floating around, so you still have to keep an open mind and think critically about what you see.

“And,” Sebastian continued, “I’ll naturally have to stop by Kales’s store.”

“Kales’s? Why?”

“I must inform him of capwort’s price change, after all. No merchant would take the news of lost profits easily, of course.”

“Yeah... I guess people are buying it up at the current price point.”

As long as the illness continued to spread, capwort would continue to sell at virtually any price. While making it cheaper would make it more accessible to the common folk, for Kales, it’d be like throwing money away.

“I wouldn’t expect him to accept such a change if it was simply conveyed in a letter, after all,” Sebastian said. “Though given how it will benefit the masses, I

doubt he would feel too troubled in any case.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “While he is a merchant, he has an intimate understanding of the Libert family’s values. He operates with the purpose of bringing ease and comfort to the populace.”

I guess that makes sense if he runs the Libert’s official store.

If Sebastian was right, though, it shouldn’t be hard to convince Kales to lower the price. The most important thing here was the difference between a written order and a face-to-face conversation.

Before long, we arrived in Ractos at the square where we typically got off the carriage.

“It was a pleasure riding with you,” Sebastian said as he moved to get off Leo’s back.

“Why don’t I go with you to the store?” I offered. “This has a lot to do with me, after all.”

He hesitated. “Are you certain? You had best be on your way.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll just ask Leo to go a little faster the rest of the way there.”

“Ru-ruff!” Leo nodded in agreement.

Sebastian might be handling the administrative side of the herb sales, but I couldn’t let him go alone in good conscience. After a moment’s hesitation, Sebastian ceded, and we headed to Kales’s store together.



“**OH**, if it isn’t Mr. Hirooka! And Sebastian as well! It’s quite an honor to see you both again. To what do I owe this most unusual pleasure?”

Sebastian and I got off Leo and headed into Kales’s store. Given how early it was still, I only saw a few employees and Kales himself there.

Nick’s not here, either... I guess he’s coming in later.

“We have a rather important matter to discuss with you,” Sebastian said.

Kales raised an eyebrow. “What kind of matter, precisely, are you referring to?”

“You see, it has to do with the capwort sales...” Sebastian took the time to thoroughly explain why we were going to lower the price and what effect we hoped it would have.

I can tell he's enjoying the chance to give another lecture... Is it just the morning light, or is he glowing right now?

After Sebastian finished, Kales stroked his chin. “I see... That certainly sounds effective. I trust you’ve cleared it with Mr. Hirooka already?”

I nodded. “The more capwort gets sold, the better.”

“In fact,” Sebastian added, “he has even offered his own cut of the profits to offset the losses.”

“My word!” Kales’s eyes nearly popped out of his head. “And here I thought it commonplace to demand the lion’s share of any profits, no matter the circumstances! If both Mr. Hirooka and House Libert agree on this matter, however, I am surely in no position to deny you. However, have you considered the potential effects of our returning to market price once the epidemic has been quelled?”

“Oh, right... I get how that could be an issue,” I said.

He’d probably get a lot more customers when the price dropped—customers who would be disappointed and might leave altogether when the price returned to normal.

It's hard to raise the price once you've lowered it, huh?

“I don’t imagine that would prove detrimental to your operations in the long run,” Sebastian replied. “Given how scarce capwort is at the moment, the effects should be limited.”

Kales nodded understandingly. “Ah, yes. Those Yugard fellows are still snapping it all up, aren’t they?”

“Regretfully so,” Sebastian said gravely. “Those cold-hearted cretins haven’t missed a beat and are no doubt continuing to sell their diluted knockoffs as we

speak. As such, authentic capwort remedies are rare enough that they pose no significant issue with a future price change—and regardless, I have every intention of handling such side effects myself.”

“Sorry for all the trouble we’re putting you through,” I apologized to Kales.

“Oh, no, no trouble at all,” Kales replied. “No salesman bent on growing their coffers without a thought as to the moral consequences can last long in this world. If I may be of service to Lady Claire and to the common people, then I would count myself blessed.”

Sebastian bowed gratefully. “Thank you for both your understanding and your generosity.”

Kales could probably handle any backlash that came from returning the prices to normal. Not only that, but capwort wasn’t a rare herb under normal circumstances, so hopefully people wouldn’t stop buying from him altogether.

“I’m glad we could settle that matter,” Sebastian said. “Now, only one matter remains.”

“Ah, yes—what *do* you suppose the Yugard store will do when they learn of this?” Kales asked.

“Your store is likely better known than theirs at this point, but we mustn’t relax our guard yet,” Sebastian warned.

“Of course. Why, I imagine they might try to sabotage us—or perhaps they would come trying to buy out *our* stock. We’ve been keeping an eye out for any such interference, but if we get too many new customers, we might not be able to vet them all.”

Oh. Kales has a good point there.

After all, if they had enough financial backing to buy out the city’s entire capwort supply in the first place, they could probably buy out Kales’s capwort as well, especially when the prices were down. It’d be harder to determine which customers came from the Yugard store as well, increasing the chances they could buy up parts of our stock. They could take an even simpler route, though, and just send a few thugs to cause a scene out front, like Nick tried to do to them. I didn’t know how far exactly they were willing to go, but they were

clearly comfortable with playing dirty.

“I shall talk to milady about assigning a few of the mansion’s guards as insurance,” Sebastian suggested. “They should be more than capable of handling the average ruffian.”

“Oh, yes, having the duke’s own guards would be a huge relief. Knowing His Grace’s standards, I don’t doubt their training was top-notch,” Kales said.

Since Eckenhart was apparently some kind of swordmaster, the guards he personally helped train wouldn’t lose to the average opponent. I’d only met three of them myself, and I’d never seen them really fight, but I didn’t doubt their strength.

“Now, as for buyout countermeasures, what do you suppose would be best?” Sebastian asked Kales.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen Sebastian ask someone for advice before. I guess he doesn’t know everything after all.

“Well, let me think.” Kales paused for a moment. “What if we were to limit the amount each customer could purchase at once?”

“I see... A purchase limit.”

Sebastian seemed as though he wasn’t fully convinced, but since time was at a premium, we ended up agreeing on that, and they’d hash out the details once I was underway. They also started thinking of what kind of rotation would be best for the mansion’s guards. Later, I heard that Claire and Sebastian worked out a system.



“**HERE’S** all the herbs you’ll need while I’m gone,” I said as I handed Kales the herbs I’d stockpiled for him.

He gratefully accepted it. “Ah, yes, thank you very much. I’ll have Nick focus on helping out in-store for the time being, then.”

“Please do. I’ll let you know as soon as I’ve arrived back at the mansion.”

“Of course, of course.”

I hope Nick uses his extra time now to learn about customer service.

Having finished our business with Kales, Sebastian and I walked toward the east gate, with Leo obediently heeling behind us. From there, I would be departing for Lange.

“This is a map of the route to Lange, Mr. Hirooka,” Sebastian said, handing a rolled-up paper to me. “I hope it is of use to you.”

“Oh, thank you.”

I’d already received directions there, but it was nice to have a map just in case. I took a moment to spread it out. It captured all the major geography around Ractos, and I spotted Lange east-by-northeast of where we were.

“Oh, okay. So, it’s pretty much just a straight shot from here,” I noted.

“Indeed. While you shall have to part from the main road after a spell, I should think it rather hard to get lost.”

It did seem like I’d have to leave the road to head north at one point, but if I left the path at the right point, I shouldn’t get lost.

We stopped not far from the east gate.

“Well, then.” Sebastian cleared his throat. “Take care, and pleasant travels. I pray you will return soon.”

“Thanks. Good luck with your investigation. Don’t get reckless.”

“Fret not, I shall be fine.”

I hope he stays safe... If they learn he works for the Liberts, there’s no telling how they might react.

“One last thing,” Sebastian continued. “Don’t forget the advice I shared with you when I taught you magic. Should the worst happen to you, milady...no, the entire Libert mansion would be grief-stricken.”

“Don’t worry, the last thing I want is to make anyone sad. I should be fine with Leo no matter what happens, but if things start going south, I’ll run away. Promise.”

There wasn’t any shame in living to fight another day, after all.

I'll just have to not get too cocky, even with Leo helping me out.

With that, Leo and I went through the east gates alone.

"All right, Leo," I said as I climbed onto her back. "Let's get going."

"Roooooo!"

"Since we're a little behind after stopping at Kales, we'll have to speed up a little to make up for it."

"Woo-woo!"

With that, Leo set off at a run. The detour to Kales's hadn't even cost us an hour, but I wanted to deliver the medicine as soon as possible.

I clung onto the bags so I wouldn't get shaken off. Leo had to be going at least twice as fast as she usually ran.

I-Isn't this a bit too fast? I was a little surprised I hadn't fallen off already, but that was probably thanks to my recently acquired muscles.

"Hey, Leo?" I shouted over the rushing wind so that she could hear me, but given her amazing hearing, I probably didn't need to. "Can you run a little bit away from the road?"

"Worf?" I could hear the confusion in her bark.

"If we passed by anyone at this speed, we'd probably scare them half to death!"

"Ruuuff... Wuuu-wooo!"

She seemed to understand my point easily enough, and she veered off the road.

Even on the hour-long ride from the mansion into Ractos, we'd passed quite a few people heading to and from the city, and they all seemed surprised to see her tearing along the road. Silver fenrir or no, seeing a giant wolf run like that had to be surprising, at the very least. I remember seeing a few horses panic and scatter their loads, and a few people even ran off the path in terror.

"Thanks, girl! We shouldn't scare as many people now!"

"Awooo!"

Knowing Leo, she couldn't have wanted to scare people like that. Just because it happened a lot didn't mean that either of us liked it.

There's no reason for anyone to be afraid of a big, fluffy sweetie like her.

We ran parallel to the road for quite a while, but just as it was nearing time for us to part from it and head north, Leo began to slow down.

"Wuff, ruff!"

"Hm? What's up?"

"Woof, woof! Wuuuuuuu!"

"Hold on, let's stop for a while."

We pulled up behind a small copse of trees where Leo wouldn't be visible from the road.

"So, what's up?"

"Wuff. Roo-woo-woooooooo?" *I'm hungry. Can we eat already?*

"Oh... That time already, huh?" The sun was already high in the sky, and a glance at my watch told me it was lunchtime on the dot. "I was hoping to make a little more progress, but I guess food comes first. Ready for lunch?"

"Ruff! Awooo!" She started wagging energetically.

She must be hungry, huh? I guess she's been running almost nonstop since breakfast.

I gave her a good scratch behind the ears as I untied the luggage. As I spread out the packing blanket, Leo peeked inside curiously.

"Okay, let's see... Where's the food?"

"Wruff?"

I know you're excited, Leo, but try not to get your hopes up. I bet it's only stuff like rations, and those taste bad in every world.

"Ah, here's the food. Huh... I guess I'll have to thank Sebastian when we get back."

"Ruff, ruff!"

Unwrapping one of the cloth packages of provisions, I took out a whole coil of sausages, a loaf of bread, and two leather water bottles. One was filled with fresh water, while the other contained a hearty soup chock-full of meat and vegetables. There was even plenty of dried meat just in case we needed some long-lasting food.

Looks like we'll have a proper meal after all.

"Can you help me get some branches together?"

"Woof!"

Together, we gathered up all the sticks we could find. We didn't have a pot to warm up the stew in, but we could at least roast the sausages.

"This should be enough fuel," I said after we'd gathered a small pile. "Could you do the honors, Leo?"

"Ruuuuff! Grr... Bark!"

Leo lit the pile on fire, and with that, we could warm the food up nicely. I skewered a few sausages on sticks and stuck them in the ground so that they'd reach out over the fire. Then we sat back to watch, Leo wagging her tail excitedly all the while.

After checking to make sure the sausages were warm but not too hot, I took them off their sticks and lined the sausages up in front of Leo.

"Okay, perfect. You can go ahead and eat them now."

"Woooo!"

With that, she dug right in.

She even waited for me to say she could eat them... I'd better praise her later, I thought as I pulled out the loaf of bread and started eating. To my pleasant surprise, I discovered that it wasn't a single solid piece but a sandwich chock-full of sliced meat and vegetables.

"This must be Helena's work... I'll make sure to thank her as soon as we get back."

"Mwuff, fwuff, mmph!" Leo nodded between mouthfuls of sausage. From the

way she was scarfing it down, I could tell it was good.

In about an hour, we both felt rested and had finished eating, and I'd begun to pack our things up again. Leo probably wasn't full yet, but since we were still en route, I didn't want her to get too full.

I'll ask Helena to make her a feast when we get back, I thought as I tossed dirt over our little fire to smother it. After making sure it was completely out, I got back on Leo's back, and we set off once more.

After a short while, I spotted the point where we were supposed to turn north.

"Take a left here, Leo!"

"Ruff."

Parting from the road, we started heading due north toward Lange.

I guess villages aren't connected by roads like back in Japan, huh?

Judging from the telltale wagon ruts in the ground, though, we were on the right track.

"This place is pretty close to the forest," I muttered.

We turned due east after a short while, riding just south of a dense-looking woodland. It wasn't as dense or as dark as the Fenrir Forest, but it was plenty intimidating all the same.

I know the map shows a forest close to the village, but I didn't realize it was this close... Maybe Lange is in the lumber trade?

After a while, however, Leo suddenly stopped.

"Ruff?!"

"What's wrong, Leo?"

She dropped her hackles and bared her teeth. "Grrrr...!"

Wait, I recognize this... The last time she acted so aggressive was when those orcs showed up.

"Grrrr... Bark, bark! BARK!"

“Okay... Got it.”

From the sound of it, there were trollds somewhere ahead of us.

“Garurrrrrr...”

She slowly stalked forward.

“I hate to ask you again, but can you handle them?”

She nodded. “Awooooo!”

We could’ve circled around them, but having Leo take them out was probably going to be a lot quicker and easier.

Leo edged forward a bit more until the point where I could see them clearly.

“Oh, yeah... Those look like trollds, all right.”

They were massive, hulking creatures, towering nearly ten feet tall, and each of them gripped a club as big as a tree trunk in its meaty hands. All in all, I counted seven of the creatures. The last time I saw trollds, Leo had already taken them out, but I still remembered how badly they’d hurt Cherie. The very sight of them caused anger to bubble up from somewhere deep inside me.

“Sorry for leaving them all to you,” I whispered as I slid off Leo’s back.

“Ruff!” *Don’t mention it!*

I didn’t want Leo to be held back at all, so I made sure to untie our luggage, too. Fortunately, none of the trollds had noticed us yet.

“Okay, Leo! Sic ’em!”

“Arooooooo!”

With a fierce howl, she sprinted right into the middle of their group. With a few lightning-fast swipes of her mighty claws, four trollds were torn to shreds, falling dead to the grass.

“Grorgh?”

“Gwooooork!”

“Gurgorh!”

“Arooooooooooooooooooooo!”

The remaining three finally noticed her and swung at her in big, powerful arcs, but they were no match for Leo's raw speed, and even together, they failed to land a hit on her. Their inhuman roars didn't seem to faze her as she ducked and weaved between them.

At this rate, even Tilura or I would stand a better chance at hitting her... Not that we ever have, of course.

"Gworgh! Gwaorgh!"

"Gurgh!"

"Grargh!"

As Leo dodged their attacks, she made swipe after vicious swipe at their hulking bodies. In about a minute, all seven trollds had fallen, powerless against her.

So this is what Leo's like when she's serious, huh? Now I get why all the legends about silver fenrir are so grim...not that Leo would ever hurt a human being like that, of course.

"Wuff?" Leo plodded back over to me.

"Good girl, Leo! And thanks." I gave her a few congratulatory strokes.

"Ruff, ruff!" She proudly began wagging her tail back and forth, clearly pleased with herself.

She should be proud. Killing seven trollds that quickly is no easy feat.

"It looks like somebody went a little overkill, though."

"W-Wuff... *whine...*" She cast a sullen look at the scattered piles of trolld chunks. *I can't eat them, so I thought I may as well,* she seemed to be saying.

She'd only cut the orcs in half, but she was far more thorough this time.

"Well, you *did* defeat them, so I can't get angry. What do we do with the mess, though?"

"Ruff?"

The grass where the trollds were had more red than green, not to mention all the fleshy chunks. It could've easily been a scene right out of a low-budget

slasher film, and if I wasn't already somewhat used to gore, I'd no doubt have lost my lunch.

Thanks to those orcs, it looks like I got over my weak stomach, at least a little bit. I think I'm getting the hang of this gory stuff. Still, not my idea of a good time.

"We can't just leave the bodies, though, or they'll rot. Maybe we should burn them?"

"Wuff?" *Ooh, can I?!* She opened her mouth.

Given the sheer number and size of the bodies, though, it would probably turn into quite the blaze, and I didn't want to risk burning down the whole forest.

"Let's not burn them. I have no idea how to do it safely, after all."

"Woff." *Lame*, she seemed to be saying as she poutily turned away.

Seriously, though, what are we going to do with the bodies? If we just let this much meat rot, we might wind up starting a whole epidemic—not to mention it's free lunch for any hungry monsters out there. The last thing I want is to lure a bunch of monsters to the road.

"I guess we should bury them?"

Leo let out a heavy sigh. "Hruff."

C'mon, Leo, don't be like that. Fire still isn't an option.

Since we couldn't easily haul the bodies off somewhere isolated, burying them was really our only option. Besides, with any luck, they would give the soil a nice shot of nutrients.

"Oh, wait... I don't have a shovel or anything."

A quick kick against the ground told me it was decently hard, and digging a big enough hole with only my bare hands was pretty much impossible.

"Ruff! Woo-woo!"

As I was considering our options, Leo seemed to get an idea.

"What is it?"

Fidgeting, she started to explain. “Woof, ruff, whoof. Wuff!”

“Wait, you can do that?”

“Ruff!”

If I understood correctly, she was suggesting she dig the hole with magic. I had no idea if that was possible, but she seemed confident enough.

“Okay, then, with magic it is. Sorry for making you do all the work again.”

“Ruff!” *Nah, no problem!*

As I lamented that I could barely do a thing during this whole problem, Leo trotted back over to the trold bodies. She turned to face an open area, then took a deep breath.

“Grr... Bark!”

With a single bark and a tremendous *BOOM*, the ground exploded.

“Whoa! Wait, was that explosion magic?!”

Leo puffed out her chest with pride. “Woof!”

“I had no idea you could do that... You’re really something else.”

“Ruff, ruff!”

As the smoke and dust began to clear, a deep crater came into view. Leo eagerly ran over to the edge and looked down into it, wagging her tail. It had to be at least thirty feet across, and it looked plenty deep.

“That’s a pretty big hole.”

“Woof!” *I know!*

We wouldn’t have any trouble fitting all the bodies inside—and luckily for us, they were already in portable little chunks.



“**PHEW...** That was harder than I’d thought. And, uh, a lot messier.”

Fortunately, the job itself didn’t take too long. Because the bodies were so fresh, many of them were still slowly bleeding, and my hands were now covered in gore. I’d done all the work since I felt so guilty about being useless

up to that point, but looking at the mess now, I was starting to regret it.

“At least all the bodies are dealt with... Oh, Leo? I hate to ask, but can I have some water?”

“Ruff, ruff!”

She used a bit of water magic so that I could wash off. It wasn't clean enough to drink, but at least I could get the blood off my hands now.

All that's left is to fill in the hole.

“So, Leo? How are you planning to fill it in?” I asked her. If I tried to do it myself, I'd be there for the rest of the day at least.

“Wuff? Ruff, wuff, whorf. Bark, bark, bark!”

She nodded and cast another spell. This time, a series of much smaller explosions rang out all around the hole, causing the ground to shift and chunks of dirt to fly. Bit by bit, the hole began to fill.

Maybe not the most elegant solution, but it works.

After a few decent blasts, the hole was roughly half-filled.

“That's enough magic, Leo. Thanks.”

“Ruff!”

Any more blasts would've left the ground looking like Swiss cheese, after all. I pretended not to see the scattered handful of holes that were already there.

“I guess we can fill in the rest of it ourselves.”

“Wuff?” Leo tilted her head to the side curiously.

Fortunately, the blasts had also gone a long way to loosen up the ground and scattered plenty of dirt, so it'd be easy enough to work it bare-handed. Together, we were able to fill in the rest of the troid hole, as well as quite a few of the smaller ones. We had a slight hiccup when Leo got distracted and started digging a new hole with her forepaws, but luckily, she didn't get far before I stopped her.

We finished up by stomping down the loose soil, making sure it was as firm as possible. The last thing we wanted was for a passing wagon to get stuck.

“That should do it. Thanks again, girl.”

“Woo-woo.”

I gave her a few good pets before tying our luggage back on her.

After climbing onto her back, I checked my pocket watch. “That ended up taking a while, though, so can you go a little faster for the last leg of the trip here?”

“Ruff?” *You sure about that?*

I could tell she was worried she’d shake me off by accident.

“Don’t worry, I’ll hold on tight. I just really want to reach Lange by the end of the day.”

“Wooooooooo!”

At the rate we were going, we might not reach the village before nightfall. Wanting to deliver the medicine quickly was important, but we didn’t have any camping gear with us either. Unlike our expedition to the Fenrir Forest, we’d have to rough it if we needed to spend the night on the way.

“Wuff-wuff! Whoof!” Leo suddenly broke into a sprint.

“Wh-Whoa!”

I almost got knocked clean off her back, but I managed to cling onto the luggage at the last moment. We were going so fast it almost felt like I was flying, but if I held on hard enough, I would probably still be fine.

Thank you, sword muscles!

After a while, just when my arms were starting to ache, I spotted a pair of horses on the trail ahead of us.

“Hm? Who’s that?”

“Ruff?”

Leo seemed to notice them as well, and she slowed down to match their pace as we approached.

“Is that Hannes and the others?” I asked, squinting to get a better look. “Yeah,

that's him and Rosalie on that horse, which means the guy in armor on the other one has to be Phillip."

They were far enough away that I couldn't tell for certain, but they certainly resembled the trio that had left the mansion a few days ago.

"Ruff, fruff?" *What's the plan?* Leo seemed to be asking.

"Hmm... Try approaching them nice and slow, so you don't spook their horses."

"Woof!"

She slowed down even more as we came into earshot.

"Hannes, Rosalie, Phillip! It's great to see you!" I called out.

Hannes jumped, struggling to look back at us. "Mr. Hirooka?! Is that you?!"

Phillip reined in his horse and slowly spun it about to face us. Leo carefully pulled up beside them. "You made good time," Phillip said as he dismounted. "We thought we wouldn't see you until Lange."

"It looks like Leo was just fast enough to catch up," I replied as I slid off Leo's back.

Hannes shook his head in disbelief. "What awesome speed... To think we had a several days' head start, even!"

"Miss Leo's amazing!" Rosalie echoed proudly.

"She sure is," Phillip agreed with a nod. "Even though we had to take a detour, that's quite the effort."

"What detour?" I asked.

That might explain our catching up, then.

"We saw a few trollds making trouble just outside the forest," he explained. "I wouldn't have been able to handle that many at once, so we had to take the long way around. Fortunately, they didn't catch our scent."

"Oh, I see. That would explain it."

He was probably referring to the ones Leo had just killed. Phillip was the only

one who could fight, and he couldn't risk Hannes or Rosalie getting hurt.

"Did you run into the trollds?" he asked me.

I scratched my head. "You could say that. Leo killed them all."

Phillip nodded. "Just like in the Fenrir Forest, then. I'd expect no less of her."

"Woooooo!" She wagged with pride.

Hanne's eyes bulged in surprise. "My word... The legends are true, then."

It wasn't even a fair fight.

To be fair, though, I wouldn't have dared take on the trollds, either.

"How about we keep moving for now?" I suggested. "We may as well talk in the village instead of the middle of the path like this."

Phillip nodded. "I agree."

"Thank you again for your boundless generosity," Hannes said with as deep a bow as he could manage.

I don't want to take too much time here, after all.

As everyone got back on their respective mounts, however, I noticed a pair of eyes on me.

"Rosalie? Everything okay?"

"Um... I want to ride on Miss Leo, too."

"Rosalie!" Hannes scolded her. "Don't be so rude!"

Come to think of it, she rode Leo back at the mansion, didn't she?

"There's no need to yell at her," I told Hannes. "Are you okay with that, Leo?"

"Woo-woooo!" Leo was already wagging excitedly, and she dropped low enough that Rosalie could get on.

I guess that answers that.

"A-Are you certain?" Hannes asked.

"Of course! Leo loves giving people rides. Isn't that right, girl?"

"Ruuuff!"

“If you insist,” he replied with a bow. “Please take care of my granddaughter.”

“Hear that, Rosalie? Hop aboard.”

“Yay! Thank you both so much!”

“Wuuuu-wuuu!”

I grabbed Rosalie’s hand and helped pull her onto Leo’s back behind me. She was grinning like a jack-o-lantern.

There’s nothing like seeing a kid smile.

“Let’s get underway, then,” Phillip announced. “The village should be just up ahead, so we can probably make it before sundown if we hurry. I’ll lead the way. Miss Leo, I trust you can take the rear guard?”

“Ru-ruff!” She nodded.

With that, Phillip and Hannes spurred their horses forward, and we were underway once again.

Man, am I glad we won’t be spending the night out here. Not being able to see in the dark sucks. I wonder if Leo can see, though? Cats can see in the dark, sure, but I don’t know about dogs...er, wolves. I’ll have to ask her about that later.



“**SO**, this is Lange, huh?” I asked.

“Yep!” Rosalie replied cheerfully. “I’ve been living here forever. Everyone’s oh so nice!”

After reuniting with Phillip and his charges, we rode east for another two hours or so before arriving in Lange. The sun had only just begun to set, casting dark shadows over the village.

“It’s pretty quiet,” I muttered.

“That it is,” Phillip mumbled in reply as he dismounted. “At this hour, I’d think there would be at least a few people out and about.”

Rosalie and I got off Leo’s back, and I scanned the area as I untied my bag from Leo’s back. I couldn’t hear a sound from any of the wooden houses around us, as if the village had been utterly abandoned. The only sign of life was the

occasional flicker of lamplight from beyond a few of the windows.

Leo put her nose to the ground. *“Sniff sniff... Wuff?”*

“What’s up, Leo?”

She cocked her head to the said. *“Wuff, woof, ruff.”*

That bad smell again, huh?

“Ruff. Woof, wuff. Rrrooo.”

Yeah, just what I was afraid of... It smells like the orphanage and whatever was on Hannes and Rosalie’s clothes.

I wasn’t surprised the village smelled the same as the clothes, but for it to smell the same as the orphanage had to mean the illness was here in force.

Does this mean Leo can really sniff out the illness?

“Woof, wuff, wuff! Ruff!”

“Wow... It’s that much stronger than the orphanage, huh? Maybe that means that there are more people infected here. Or maybe there could be something else to this... Looks like we might’ve been right to come check it out ourselves, huh, Leo?”

“Wuff?” She gave me a puzzled look.

The epidemic was hitting Ractos hard, but the only place she picked up that strange smell was at the orphanage. Not only that, but she also didn’t seem to pick up the scent from any people aside from Hannes and Rosalie. There was a chance that there was some other factor connecting them—or maybe I was overthinking things, and it only had to do with the number of infected people making enough of a scent for her to pick up on.

“I’m afraid the village has been this way ever since the disease broke out,” Hannes explained as he joined us. *“Why, it was just as silent when we left at midday.”*

“Everybody’s so tired,” Rosalie added sadly as she looked around. *“Even the other kids are sick.”*

“The epidemic’s bringing everyone down, I guess,” I said.

Phillip nodded. "I'd imagine that without any medicine, all they can do is stay in their homes and wait."

It made sense. If they couldn't get cured, then it would be too dangerous to keep working like usual, or even go outside without a reason. Since everyone was staying at home, the streets were quiet and empty.

A flu-like disease that immediately gets cured by a bit of capwort, huh...? That's nothing like any sickness I know. Illnesses might work totally differently in this world altogether.

"I-Is that you, Mr. Mayor?" came a boy's voice from a nearby house. "You're back!" I turned to see a kid about Rosalie's age peeking out from behind a door.

"Oh, Rye! How good to see you!" Hannes walked over to him and crouched down to his level. "How are your parents doing?"

"They didn't get any better," Rye said sadly. "They keep coughing real bad, and they're still burning up. They're sleeping now, but they keep tossing and turning..."

"Ah, I see." Hannes's smile grew strained.

Poor kid... It sounds like both his parents caught it bad. I bet they're stuck inside. Rye looks exhausted, too.

"You brought medicine back with you, right?" Rye asked hopefully. "Mom and Dad are gonna be okay, right? Right?"

Hannes nodded. "That's right. This is Mr. Hirooka. He's a skilled apothecary sent by Lady Claire herself to save us."

"Nice to meet you, Rye," I added.

"It's a pleasure!" He seemed to brighten up. "You can heal my parents, right?"

"Of course. Just relax, they're both going to be okay."

It was honestly a little embarrassing to be treated like I was some savior, but at least he had some hope now.

Leo plodded up beside me, evidently hoping to help put him at ease. "Ruff!"

His eyes nearly popped out of his head with terror. "Wh-Whoa!"

I guess Rosalie was scared at first, too...

“Rye, this is Leo,” I introduced her. “Don’t worry, she won’t hurt you.”

“She’s a silver fenrir,” Hannes added. “It’s thanks in part to her that we made it here. We’re so lucky to have her.”

Rosalie smiled and nodded. “Miss Leo’s really nice and friendly, too, so stop being such a scaredy-cat, Rye-Rye!”

Rye looked around at us, then glanced back at Leo. “R-Really?”

I could tell he wasn’t totally convinced, but I could also tell he was curious to learn more.

Wolves are cool, after all. I think most boys go through a phase where they get into that kind of thing, especially with the whole “lone wolf” aesthetic. At least, that’s how it was for me.

“Uh... Sorry, Leo, can you wait with Phillip for a while?” I turned to Phillip. “Can you watch her for a bit?”

“Of course,” he replied.

Leo cast me a sullen look. “Hruff...”

“Oh...” Rye muttered as Leo skulked away.

I could tell he wanted to say something, but since his fear of Leo didn’t seem like it was going away soon, this was probably for the best.

I turned to Hannes. “Can I start with Rye’s parents?”

“By all means.” He smiled at Rye. “Mind if we come in? Mr. Hirooka has some special medicine for your mom and dad.”

He nodded. “Okay. Please make them better quick, sir!”

I nodded firmly. “Don’t worry, they’ll be on their feet in no time.”

I didn’t want to make him uneasy, after all, especially since I knew I could cure their illness.

After stepping inside, Rye showed me to the room where his parents were resting. They had the exact same flu-like symptoms as the kids at the

orphanage, from their fevers to their coughs.

“I’ve seen this sickness before,” I told them. “A little capwort will get them on their feet in no time.”

Honestly, it’s hard to believe this isn’t the flu... I guess a lot of illnesses act similar, though.

“Really?!” Rye’s expression lit up. “You can make them better again?!”

“Of course. They’ll be just fine.” I reached into my pack and pulled out a bit of powdered capwort. “Here, have them take this.”

Hannes nodded. “Very well. Do you have any water, Rye?”

“I-I’ll go draw some right now!”

Rye ran out of the room, coming back a minute or two later with a small basin of water in his hands. It was a little hard to get them to swallow the powder from the way they were coughing, but I’d watched the nuns administer the same medicine to the children at the orphanage, so I had some idea of what I was doing.

It only took a few minutes for the medicine to take effect. Their coughs grew less pained until they stopped completely, and the color returned to their faces.

“That’s...much better...” Rye’s mother mumbled.

Rye jumped with joy. “Wow! I can’t believe they’re better already!”

This wasn’t the first time I’d seen the capwort at work, but it was no less baffling to me. Cold medicine still required you to sleep off the illness, after all. Then again, it could just be that capwort was that much more potent than the mugwort I knew in Japan. Loe was stronger than aloe vera by a wide margin, so it didn’t seem impossible.

Rye’s dad bowed gratefully. “Thank you so much for helping us. Honestly, I don’t know how we could ever repay you.”

Rye’s mom nodded in agreement. “Why, it’s like that horrible cough and fever were just a bad dream. Thank you for coming, Mr. Hirooka.”

“No need to thank me. If anything, you should thank Hannes and Rosalie for

trying so hard to save everyone.”

All I did was grow the capwort. They did the real work, trying all sorts of places in Ractos before coming so far as the duke’s mansion to ask for help. If they hadn’t, we never would’ve known there was trouble in Lange at all. Hannes seemed to be humbly denying his role in things, however, and Rosalie was likewise trying to hide her embarrassment.

“Anyway, Hannes, here’s the rest of the capwort,” I said as I handed him the cloth-wrapped bundle of medicine. “Try to make sure everyone in the village gets some.”

His eyes widened. “Why, there’s so much! And in so little time... Including the amount you gave me before leaving, this should be plenty. How can we ever repay you?”

I wasn’t originally planning to run into Hannes partway, after all—but either way, it seemed like it would be enough medicine.

I’m so glad I pushed myself a little and made that extra capwort. I feel a little bad about making Laila and everyone worry so much, but it turned out to be worth it.

“We can worry about that later,” I replied. “Right now, we need to get this medicine to everyone who needs it.”

Hannes nodded. “Of course! Celebrations can wait until everyone has received their share.”

“Can I help, too?” Rosalie asked.

“Please allow us to help, too,” Rye’s father echoed.

“Me too! Let me help!” Rye followed suit.

It looks like they all want to help their fellow townsfolk... Everything’s going to turn out okay, after all.



“HRUFF!”

As soon as I split the capwort up between Hannes and the other villagers, I

stepped outside Rye's house to find a very upset-looking Leo.

"Sorry, girl." I gave her a few apologetic strokes. "You were scaring Rye a little, so I thought it'd be better if you gave him some space."

Not that she could've fit inside the house if he wasn't.

"Ruff, ruff."

"Thanks for watching her, Phillip."

"No trouble at all," he replied. "She's been very well-behaved. We've been waiting here without issue."

Good... Better Phillip have nothing to do than have to watch Leo constantly.

"So? How did the medicine go?" he asked.

"Oh, it went great," I said. "It took effect right away. In fact, Rye's parents are so healthy now, they're helping Hannes and the others hand out the capwort."

"I'd have expected no less from you. Even the infirmed are brought to their feet with ease."

"It wasn't me, though, it was all the capwort's doing," I said. "Besides, Rye's parents probably weren't sick for very long."

Judging from the kids at the orphanage, how much energy you had after taking the capwort depended on how long you were sick. It made sense, since being sick for a long time always made me feel drained.

Phillip looked out at the village. "I hope this place returns to normal soon."

"Yeah. I couldn't be happier, putting my herbs to work like this. A village where everyone's sick just feels so cold and lonely."

"Woof, wuff."

Little by little, as Hannes and the others worked their way through the village, I could hear voices coming from houses all over. Phillip and I chatted as we watched life return to the once-empty town, Leo wagging her fluffy tail behind us all the while.



“I could never thank you enough for the great service you’ve done our village, Mr. Hirooka. You’ve saved our lives.”

After a while, Hannes came to collect Phillip and me from where we were waiting by the village gates and invited us into his home. As it happened, there was enough capwort for the entire village without even needing the extra little bit I’d made while we were waiting.

Oh, well. I guess I can just take this back to Kales.

Leo, of course, couldn’t fit inside the house, so she was outside playing with Rosalie. Rye was with them, apparently convinced Leo wouldn’t try to eat him after seeing the two play. Hannes also took the liberty of telling people about Leo as he delivered the medicine, and while there were still a few people who were shocked to see her, they welcomed her overall.

I’m glad to see they’re not afraid of her.

Hannes placed a leather pouch on the table between us. “I’m afraid it’s hardly proper compensation, but this is all we can pay for your services. Given how long the disease has had its run of the village, we simply don’t have the funds to pay you properly.”

I pushed the bag back toward him. “Keep it. You’ll need it to help Lange get back on its feet. I’m here to help you first and foremost, and I’ve already discussed my pay with the Liberts.”

I nearly worked myself to death for a paycheck back in Japan, to the point where I was practically working for the sake of it, and I was done with that life. Before I left, though, Claire insisted that she pay me as though this were a formal business order from House Libert. Getting paid twice didn’t sit right with me, and Lange clearly needed the money more than I did.

Hannes’s expression fell. “Oh, no, we can’t allow Lady Claire to trouble herself so. You came all the way to our humble little village, so I can’t simply turn you away in good conscience.”

Really, though, he doesn’t need to worry about it... That’s the whole reason Claire’s paying me, after all.

As I mulled it over, though, a new thought occurred to me. “Well, I *am* feeling

pretty hungry,” I said. “If you could get me something good to eat, I’d appreciate it. Oh, and a place to stay the night, if you don’t mind. I’d rather not sleep outside.”

He frowned. “We had every intention of accommodating you in that respect either way.”

I chuckled nervously. “Hahaha, that’s fine! Besides, it doesn’t feel right to accept money for saving lives. And trust me, keeping Leo fed at her size will be challenging enough for you.”

The sun had completely set by now, and it was totally dark outside. Neither Leo nor I had eaten anything since lunch, and I was starting to get hungry. Add in a nice bed and that would be enough for me.

I was thinking of telling him that seeing the villagers’ smiles once everyone recovered would be my reward, but I can’t say that now... It sounds too much like I’m bragging.

“My, what a selfless young man you are! I must admit, I’m moved half to tears. I’ll have every villager up and cooking a feast for you and your companions in no time!” Still shaking his head in disbelief, he stood up and stepped outside. “Hey, everyone!” he shouted. “We’re going to have a feast! A grand thank-you banquet for Mr. Hirooka and Miss Leo!”

“Let’s do it!” came the resounding cry of the villagers.

A-A banquet? That seems like a little much, but I bet Leo and I will both get to eat our fill. Phillip too, I guess.

As I heard the excited bustling of preparations drifting in through the window, though, I let out a happy sigh.

Maybe it’ll be good to take a break and celebrate the village returning to normal.



“**AH**, Mr. Hirooka! Please, take a seat. Oh, and feel free to sit beside him, Miss Leo.”

“Thank you.”

“Ruff!”

After about an hour of preparations, Hannes led me to one of the many tables set up in the center of the village and invited me to sit. Leo obediently sat down beside me, but I could tell from the way she was wagging her tail around that she was eager to try the food. They brought out plate after plate, piled high with local delicacies, and put a massive dish full of sausages and a bowl of milk in front of Leo.

Uh... Leo eats a lot, sure, but I couldn't finish all this if I tried.

“Allow me to introduce you to our village’s specialty,” Hannes said with great pomp. “This is our humble beverage, greital wine.”

“A wine?”

He poured me a glass out of a massive barrel. It was a translucent liquid with an intense reddish tint, and the strong smell of alcohol and sweet fruits hit my nostrils.

Come to think of it, I haven't seen any booze in this world before now... I guess that must be this village's specialty. It looks like normal wine to me, though, and it even smells like grapes...

“The barrels are made from locally sourced wood,” he continued, “many of which we sell to His Grace—not that I’ve had the pleasure of meeting him myself, of course. We use our leftover barrels to produce this liqueur.”

“Oh, I see.”

I’d heard that House Libert had plenty of business outside of their herbs sales, but I’d never seen any concrete signs of it before now. The barrel that Hannes had brought out was full of liquor, of course, but by selling the other barrels they made to the duke, both sides could make a decent profit.

That'd also explain why Sebastian and Claire were both so willing to let me come here. They need Lange's barrels, after all... Or maybe I'm overthinking things, and they're just concerned about the people who live here.

“Given our proximity to the forest, we also sell lumber directly to Ractos,” Hannes continued. “And while we produce only small quantities of greital wine,

we sell most of what we do make in town as well.”

“Huh... Makes sense.”

It looks like my guess was on the money, then. They do sell wood here.

Their proximity to the forest gave them access to quality lumber, both to sell directly and to make into barrels, while the greital wine helped them generate money on the side.

“Where do you get the fruits for the wine, though?” I asked. “I didn’t see any orchards on the way into town, at least.”

“We take the liberty of importing all the greitals we use from elsewhere.”

Greitals for greital wine, huh? Just like apples for apple cider. I wonder what kind of fruit a greital is?

“So you use those fruits to make this cider—er, wine? What are they like?”

“A greital, you see, has a stone-hard shell...”

According to Hannes, greitals were about the size of coconuts and had a similarly thick outer shell. The inside, however, was filled with tender red flesh. His description almost made them sound like little watermelons, but apparently, the outer shell was a vibrant shade of purple. He took the time to explain the entire process to me, from squeezing the juice out of the insides to loading it into the barrels to ferment.

Sounds like greitals are totally unique to this world, then. I guess they aren’t any different from capwort or loe in that sense—they all look and sound like plants from my old world, but they have totally different properties.

“The climate of the duke’s domain is ill-suited to growing greitals,” Hannes explained. “As such, we import them from abroad.”

“Wow. I’d imagine the disease hit your village pretty hard when it put everyone out of commission, then.”

He nodded solemnly. “Given the import costs, it’s crucial that we make the most of every drop. We can scarcely survive on the income from the lumber and barrel sales alone, and the relative scarcity of greitals certainly doesn’t do us any favors. But thanks to your efforts, it seems there will be plenty of wine

yet to come.”

I guess something about the soil or weather here just isn't right for growing them.

I was a little surprised to hear they spent so much money importing the fruits, but since they had plenty of wood and even spare barrels to soak up the other expenses, it might not be that bad overall.

Leave it to a village of experienced woodworkers to make the most of their trade. I don't know anything about administration, let alone running a whole village, so I could never come up with a plan like that.

“Oh, my apologies. I imagine you'd rather enjoy the banquet than listen to an old man ramble on, wouldn't you?” Hannes chuckled. “Please, enjoy yourself to your heart's content.”

“You really didn't have to go this far for us...but thank you,” I said.

Since I'd probably be leaving the next day, all I really wanted was a warm dinner and a bed. Looking at the festivities all around me, though, I knew I couldn't just duck out.

I guess I'll just be grateful for the food, then. I'm really not much of a drinker...

I took a hesitant sip of wine from the nearly overflowing wooden mug Hannes gave me. “What? How does it taste *this* good?! I've never had alcohol this sweet!”

“Strike your fancy, does it?”

I nodded. “Definitely! I don't drink very often, but this is easily the best I've ever had!”

For the first time in my life, I didn't feel disgusted by liquor. It was fruity and mellow to the point that I could barely believe it was alcoholic at all, and the scent was enough to fill my mouth and nostrils with every sip. Best of all, the slight tartness helped remove any saccharine aftertaste, which made sure it didn't get stale or overwhelming as I drank. I wasn't a sommelier by any measure, but it certainly felt like a top-class liqueur.

Maybe it's this sweet because it's more similar to a fruit cider than a wine? I

remember hearing that the sugars in the juice decompose to become alcohol, so I didn't think it was possible for an unmixed drink like this to be so sweet. It still tastes alcoholic, even.

Hannes beamed at me. "I'm quite pleased that it meets your tastes. Please, have as much as you'd like."

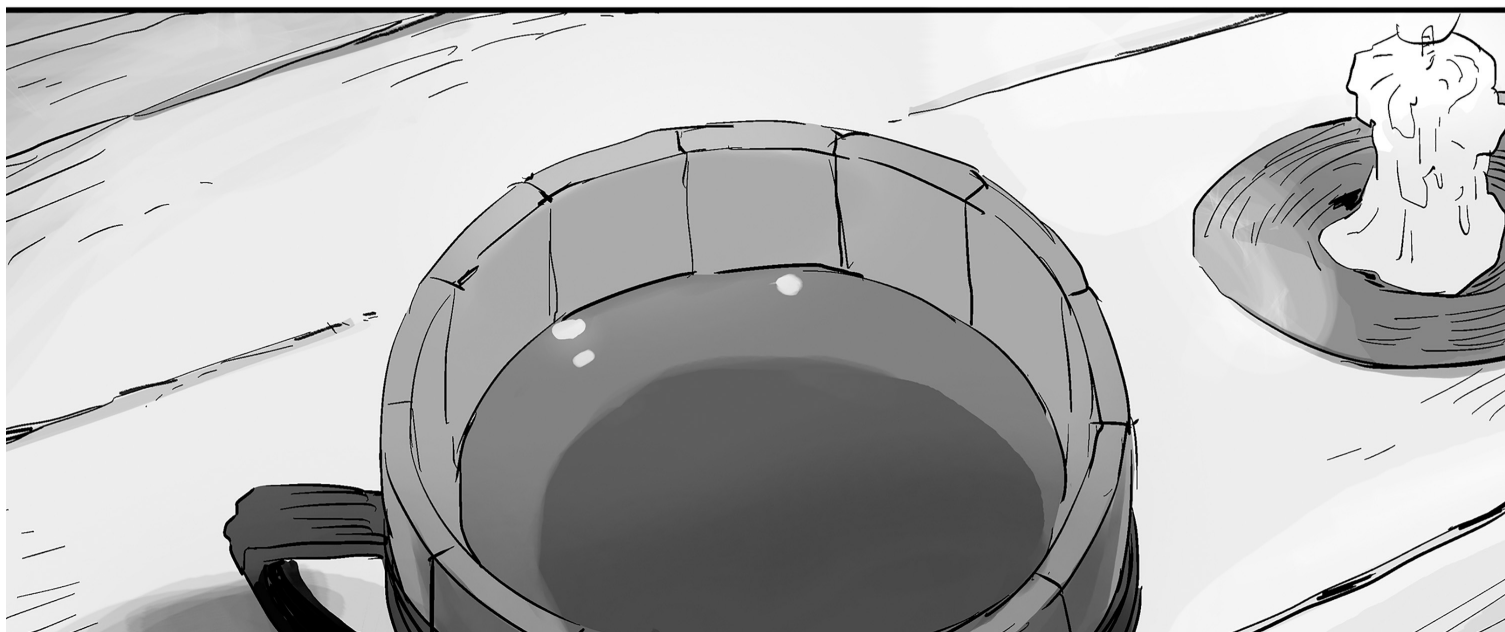
"Thank you!" I replied in a much louder voice than I'd intended.

I can't help it, it's just that good!

Before I realized it, I had downed the rest of the mug and even polished off a second as I worked my way through the food.

I'm not feeling drunk at all, though. Maybe it's got a low proof?

Beside me, Leo was energetically working her way through her sausages.



“The food tastes great, too. It’s perfect with the wine!”

“Naturally,” Hannes replied. “As its producers, we have an intimate understanding of our wine’s flavor profile.”

I couldn’t tell if they made the food to fit the wine or the wine to fit the food, but every bite seemed perfectly paired.

As I enjoyed the feast, villagers came up—sometimes alone, sometimes in groups—to see me.

“Thank you for helping us out, sir! We really appreciate it!”

“You made all our pain and suffering go away like it was just a strange dream!”

“You not only saved me, but my wife and boy, too... I could never thank you enough.”

Leo didn’t seem interested in either the crowds or the drink, though, and was perfectly content to focus on her own food. After stuffing herself with as many sausages as she possibly could, she filled up on milk and let out a refreshed sigh.

Getting to see all these sick people up and about again, all while enjoying great food and drink... This really is the best way to celebrate.

Just as I was starting to relax, however, a familiar figure stumbled over to me from a neighboring table.

“Heya, Takumi! *Hic* Howsh it goin’?”

“Uh... Phillip?”

He was beet red, as though he’d just gotten out of a steaming-hot bath, and he couldn’t even walk straight.

“Thish wine’s the besht, huh? Hard not to go for ’nother mug, am I right? *Hic* Keep on drinkin’, you ’ear?”

“Um... Maybe you’ve had a little... No, way too much to drink.”

I didn’t particularly mind that he was loosening up, but this struck me as a little much.

“Hahaha!” he chortled. “An’ here I thought it was just a borin’ ol’ trip out to nowhereshville... Didn’t think I’d get to drink shome of the good shtuff out ’ere!”

“Just how much did you drink? Uh... Let’s find you somewhere to lie down.”

Man, do I suck at dealing with drunks.

I’d drunk a fair bit of wine myself, but it wasn’t affecting me in the slightest. Either Phillip was extremely bad at holding his drink, or he’d had a *huge* amount.

He shrugged me off. “Nah, don’t shweat it! Shure, it’sh strong shtuff, but you gotta drink it down while you can! Good luck affordin’ it in Ractos!”

I froze. “Wait. Greital wine’s really that strong?”

I wasn’t going to leave him when he was clearly wasted, but his words weren’t quite making sense. If it really did have a high alcohol content, it’d certainly explain how he could get so drunk without having a lot. I didn’t know what his tolerance levels were like, but either way, I’d drunk quite a bit and felt perfectly fine.

I usually start getting tipsy after just a single beer, though... What’s going on here?

“Ahahahaha!” Phillip chortled as he stumbled away. “Enjoy da party, Takumiii!”

After watching him stumble off, I took a moment to look around. He should be fine as long as he was away from everyone else and didn’t do anything stupid. I could tell just from where I sat that more than half the villagers who were eating and drinking were red in the face. It wasn’t because of the illness, either, since none of the kids who were playing with Leo looked red-faced—only the drinking adults. The sober adults were the ones without wooden mugs in front of them, and who were focusing on their food.

“It looks like the only people who aren’t drunk are the ones who are only having a tiny bit of wine, or none at all.” I took a moment to flag down Hannes. “Hannes? Do people get drunk on greital wine that easily?”

“Oh, yes. Almost everyone in the village who drinks it is drunk within minutes, myself included. I’ve heard that’s one of the sources of its popularity in Ractos.”

So it’s that alcoholic, huh? I guess that’s why lots of people buy it, even if it’s expensive, because it’s so potent.

There could be other explanations, of course, but that wasn’t my main concern now.

“Oh? Why, this barrel is empty! Would you care for another, Mr. Hirooka?”

“U-Uh...no. No, water’s great. Water, please.”

“If you say so.”

When we’d sat down, that massive barrel was completely full, and while I wasn’t the only person working on it, I’d certainly had my share.

How did I drink so much without getting even a little tipsy?!

“This is so weird... I’ve never been able to hold my liquor...” I muttered.

“Wuff?”

Leo looked up from beside me, a drowsy look still in her eyes. Beside her, a group of children was playing with her tail, and she was keeping them occupied by swishing it lazily back and forth.

Huh. She sure is talented.

“Do you know why I’m not drunk, Leo?”

She gave me a baffled look. “Ruffa?” *How should I know?* She seemed to be saying.

I guess it still tastes good, and I should probably consider it a good thing that it isn’t negatively affecting me.

“I’ve brought your water,” Hannes announced as he brought me a new cup.

“Thank you.”

Did my body change somehow when I came here? I don’t feel any different, though, aside from not getting drunk anymore. The only other thing that’s changed is my Gift. Of course, I’m not a fan of getting drunk, so maybe I should

consider myself lucky. I could probably drink more wine!

Just in case, though, I decided to stick with water.



WHEN the banquet finally wound down, it was well past midnight and into the early morning. Since Leo couldn't fit inside any of the houses, she ended up sleeping out in the stable with Phillip's horse.

I guess I should sleep, too. Even if I don't get a hangover, I can tell I'll be exhausted in the morning.

Hannes was kind enough to offer me a spare room in his house, and I'd just crawled into bed when I remembered something.

"I wonder where Phillip went?"

I was a little worried he'd wandered off and gotten himself into trouble.

I just hope someone doesn't wake up in the morning to find him passed out on the floor...

"Or worse, he might wake up in bed with a woman he barely knows? I can just imagine the maids tearing him a new one when we get back."

I continued to mutter to myself as I watched the first hints of dawn emerge along the horizon.

It's pretty much morning, but I guess I'd better get some sleep now while I can.

Chapter 4: A Mysterious Doll and a Serious Problem

“MORNING.”

“Good morning, Mr. Hirooka!” Hannes’s wife said with a smile. “Breakfast is ready for you, should you care to partake.”

“Thanks.”

After waking up a little later than usual and washing up, I left the room I’d been lent to have breakfast. Hannes’s house was a little bigger than most of the other houses in town, and since they happened to have an extra room, I was staying there. Their son and his wife—Rosalie’s parents, in other words—lived elsewhere in town, so it was just the three of us. During the banquet, I’d heard that Rosalie’s parents had also fallen ill, which was why she was so determined to go with her grandfather to get help.

“This is pretty good,” I remarked as I ate breakfast.

Hannes’s wife smiled faintly. “Oh, nonsense. I’m sure it’s nowhere near as good as what they serve you at His Grace’s villa.”

“I wouldn’t say that. This is delicious, too.”

It didn’t quite match up to what I had at the mansion, granted, but it wasn’t too far off the mark. Good food was good food, no matter where it was served. The vegetable soup was especially tasty, and it warmed every corner of my body.

“Good morning,” said Hannes with a yawn as he entered the room. “Ah, Mr. Hirooka! You’re up early.”

“Morning, Hannes.”

It was nearly noon, so it was barely morning at all, but I didn’t think I slept too long, considering when I fell asleep.

“Thanks for the meal,” I said as I finished. “It was great. Thanks for having me.”

“Oh, no, don’t mention it,” Hannes’s wife replied. “If anything, I should be apologizing that we have so little to offer.”

She doesn’t have to be so humble, though. It really did taste great.

“Aroooo!”

“Huh? Was that Leo?”

I stepped outside the house to find Leo sitting there obediently, her tail wagging.

“Morning, Leo! How’d you sleep?” I gave her some morning cuddles.

“Ruff!”

From the way she was wagging, it looked like she and Phillip’s horse slept just fine.

“Wuff? *Sniff sniff*” She leaned in close to me and took a few deep sniffs before casting me a deeply hurt look. “*Whine...*”

“Hm? What’s wrong?”

“Wuff... Ruff, fruff... *whine...*”

“Oh, right... Breakfast. Sorry about that.”

I guess she can smell it on me.

She couldn’t eat hay like the horse did, so there was a high chance that she hadn’t had any food yet.

“Hannes?” I called into the house from the doorstep. “Sorry to bother you, but do you have anything Leo can eat for breakfast?”

Hannes came out right away, a whipped look on his face as he bowed deeply. “I’m most dreadfully sorry, Miss Leo. In my ignorance, I had failed to consider you entirely. I’ll bring you something post-haste.”

“Bark!” *You should be sorry, old man!*

“Hey!” I chided her. “That’s not how you thank someone who’s about to feed you. Where’s his thank you?”

“Ruff...” Leo gave me a sorry look before turning to Hannes and dipping her

head. “Wuff, wuff.”

Hannes paled. “Oh, there’s no need to apologize to the likes of me! Why, I don’t know how I should respond to such a gesture!”

Even if he’s fine with it, I’m not. Leo needs to learn to be polite and to treat others with respect.

Moments later, Hannes’s wife came out with a steaming platter of food. “I’m sorry, but I’m afraid the only thing we have for her is leftovers from last night. I do hope it’ll be enough.”

Most of the platter was reheated sausages, but not nearly in the same volume as during the banquet. Instead, there were several side dishes accompanying it.

“Thank you. I really appreciate it. Now what do we say to the nice lady, Leo?”

“Wuff. Woo-woo!”

After saying her thank-yous, she dug right into the food.

The wife shook her head in disbelief. “She really does listen to you, doesn’t she? I could scarcely believe it when Hannes told me.”

“Oh, Leo’s very clever,” I said. “She doesn’t attack people without good reason, and she loves playing with kids.”

Almost nobody is scared of Leo now, and she’s only been here since last night. This is a really nice place.

Just as I was starting to relax, however, a man came running up to Hannes.

“Hey, Mr. Mayor! You’d better come quick!” he shouted.

“Hm? What’s wrong?” Hannes called back.

The two of them met in the middle, the man panting.

“I-It’s about the man who came here with the apothecary...”

“Phillip?!” I cut in. “Is he all right?”

“Oh, sir! You’re up! Can you come along, too?”

“Yeah, of course.”

I hope Phillip isn’t in any trouble.

“Can you watch Leo for a bit?” I asked Hannes’s wife. “If any kids come along, feel free to let Leo play with them.”

“All right,” she nodded. “I bet Rosalie will be awake soon.”

“Great.” I turned to Leo. “Be a good girl while I’m gone, okay?”

“Wurf! Bargh!” Leo added, mouth half full of sausage.

C’mon, girl, that’s horrible manners...but I guess I have bigger fish to fry right now.

I was starting to worry about Phillip. The more I thought about it, the more likely it seemed he would’ve gotten into trouble when he wandered off drunk.

I followed Hannes and the messenger, coming to the only stone building in sight on the southern edge of the village.

“This is it, sir,” the man said.

“Okay. Uh... What’s this place?”

“We store the wine to ferment here,” Hannes explained.

A stone building for fermentation, huh? Sounds about right.

Our guide struggled to open the heavy door before stepping aside. “Go on in, take a look.”

The heavy scent of the fermenting greitals hit me like a jab to the nose before I even crossed the threshold. Anyone with a low alcohol tolerance could probably get drunk on the smell alone. The second thing I noticed, however, was Phillip. He was lying collapsed on the storehouse floor, a strange-looking doll in his hands. Fortunately, I could hear him breathing steadily.

“Phillip?! Wait, is he sleeping?”

Hannes peered in over my shoulder. “So it seems.”

The man scratched his head. “See, I was feeling better, so I decided to come get a little work in. As soon as I opened the door, though... You can probably guess. I didn’t know if I should wake him up or not, so I came to get the mayor.”

“Oh, I see.” I bowed apologetically to them. “I’m so sorry Phillip caused trouble for you. This place is probably important to you all.”

Hannes shook his head. “Oh, no, please don’t mention it. I think we all got a little carried away at last night’s banquet, and so long as no damage has been done, I see nothing to apologize over.”

I’m not surprised the worker was confused, though. Phillip hails from the duke’s mansion, too, so Hannes might frown on just kicking him to the curb.

Seriously, though, Phillip should know better than to sleep in a place like this. It’s so damp and chilly in here, he might catch a cold, epidemic aside. Not to mention that outsiders like us really shouldn’t be here at all. We’re just lucky Hannes is so nice.

I walked right up to him and started lightly slapping his rosy cheeks. “Phillip, wake up!” I shouted. “You can’t sleep here!”

“Hngh...” he moaned. Slowly, Phillip sat up and looked around, befuddled. “Mr. Hirooka...? Where am I?”

“You’re in the greital wine storehouse. You’ll be in everyone’s way if you keep sleeping here. Come on, let’s go.”

“A storehouse...? No wonder it’s so cold...”

Finally understanding his situation, he moved to stand up but had to stop when a few hoarse coughs emerged from his throat.

Wait, did he actually catch a cold?

“Phillip? Are you okay?”

“Ugh, my head hurts... Why do I feel so heavy...?”

I watched his expression carefully as he tried to stand up again. He seemed a little more stable than he had last night, but his movements were slow and sluggish, and he seemed to be struggling to support his own weight.

Wait... His face isn’t red from the booze. It looks like he has a fever!

Hannes peered into his face worriedly. “My word... We need to get this man inside right away!”

“Of course!” I agreed, coming to the same conclusion.

“Let me help!” the worker offered.

Hannes offered Phillip a shoulder, and with the three of us together, we were able to help Phillip back into Hannes's house. Phillip was too weak to support himself, let alone walk, and we nearly had to carry him the whole distance. After taking him into the room I'd slept in, we laid him down on the bed. The man who'd found Phillip then rushed back to the storehouse, probably to check on the wine.

Hannes let out a worried sigh. "He has the illness, doesn't he? I recognize these symptoms!"

I nodded as I measured Phillip's temperature with the back of my hand. "Yeah, looks like it."

He had a fever and was red in the face, and his cough sounded just like the orphans' and Rye's parents' coughs did.

Seriously, why did he decide to sleep there, of all places?

I sighed. "Looks like I don't have much choice... Can you go get me some water, Hannes?"

"Y-Yes, certainly, but what are you planning to do?"

"Simple. I'll give him some capwort, and if his symptoms go away, we'll know it was the same sickness."

"But didn't you use the last of the capwort last night? I could've sworn there wasn't any left."

"I prepared a little while you were divvying up the capwort to everyone, just in case. I thought it might come in handy, but we didn't end up needing it then."

"You did?" He blinked at me in surprise. "But how?"

"Don't worry about the details. Treating Phillip comes first. At this rate, we could be looking at an entirely new outbreak here."

"O-Of course. I'll bring you some water as quickly as I can."

"Thanks." I waited for him to leave the room before fishing through my bags for the extra capwort and muttering, "What's going on here?"

I wasn't too worried about a new outbreak, given that most of the villagers

probably had antibodies against it now, but there was always a chance the virus had changed or mutated, and I wasn't going to take that chance. Finally grabbing the capwort, I used my Gift to powder it.

Beside me, Phillip let out a hacking series of coughs.

"I guess I'm getting used to this," I muttered as I got the powder ready to feed him. "All right, now I just wait for... Hm?"

Sometime during his coughing fit, Phillip had dropped the doll he'd been clutching onto the bed beside himself.

Come to think of it, he's been holding that thing ever since we found him.

"I guess I'll put it aside for now," I said as I picked it up. It was made of wood and just small enough to be comfortably held in one hand.

Weird. Maybe it's for good luck or something?

While I examined it, however, Hannes came back into the room.

"I've brought the water," he announced.

Phillip belted out another cough as I put the doll on the side table and grabbed the medicine. With Hannes's help, we managed to prop him up and poured the water down his throat, the capwort powder already dissolved in it.

"There, just like that," I coaxed as he gulped it down. "Don't cough it up."

"*Cough!* Ugh..." He struggled for a moment before finally swallowing.

That's all of it. Hopefully, he'll be fine now. Now, all we can do is wait.

As we sat back and watched Phillip for any changes, the doll caught Hannes's eye. His brow furrowed. "Oh? What's this doing here?"

"Phillip was holding it," I explained. "He'd brought it here from the storehouse, and I put it aside so it wouldn't get stepped on."

"To think he'd bring this little trinket all the way back here," he muttered.

"Uh... What is it, exactly?"

Thinking back on it, Phillip had been sleeping as if to protect it. The carving on it was intricate enough that it could've been made by a skilled craftsman. At any

rate, it didn't strike me as something that belonged in a storehouse.

"A merchant gifted it to us a while back," Hannes explained. "Apparently, placing it near the barrels as they ferment will help draw out better flavors."

"Better flavors...?"

That's a little hard to believe.

It was possible that there was some sort of enchantment on it with that effect, but to me, it looked like just a regular trinket. If anything, it sounded like a scam, like a vase that brought good luck or something.

"If I remember, it was a little over a month ago now," Hannes continued. "There were two of the merchants, and they claimed it would be of great use to us."

"A month ago?" Something about that timing felt off, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. I had to learn more. "What else were the merchants here for? It wasn't just to drop off the doll, right?"

"Our usual greital supplier was unavailable, so they came to deliver the fruit in his stead."

"Oh, okay...and while they were here, they dropped off the doll, too?"

Hannes nodded. "The doll was carved in the image of a renowned brewer who lived ages ago, it seems. If we left it in the storehouse, the spirit of the brewer would bless our wine—or so they said."

"So it's a good luck charm?"

"Yes, something of the sort. It was small enough not to get in anyone's way, and it did seem to improve the flavors somewhat, so we left it there as the merchants had instructed."

So it's like a placebo effect, then? Basically, they believed the doll would work, so it did. Or wait, this world has magic and everything, so who's to say the brewer's spirit isn't actually living inside it? No, not likely... Honestly, with the amount of detail that thing has, it's just plain creepy.

"Speaking of fruits, where do you get all the ingredients you need for your wine?" I asked.

The topic of alcohol hadn't come up at all at the mansion, so I had no idea how it worked in this world.

"The greitals are grown in a village quite far from here—the neighboring count's domain, if I recall. We have them shipped directly to us for processing. As it happens, they lack the correct type of lumber needed to make proper greital wine themselves."

Maybe the next domain over has a lot less woodland in general? Or they might just not grow the right kind of tree there. Still, that count's domain, of all places...

"By 'count,' do you mean Count Bastler?" I asked to be sure.

"Why, yes, the very same. He has a great love of greitals and allows the trade in exchange for his pick of our finest wine."

I barely knew the first thing about this world's political situation, but Count Bastler was a name that stuck with me.

I didn't think I'd hear that name here, though.

The doll arrived in Lange a month ago, which just happened to coincide with the founding of the Yugard store, and soon after, the outbreak in Ractos. I wasn't great at guesswork by any measure, but something told me it was all connected somehow.

"Do you send any wine to Ractos?" I asked.

"Of course. It's the biggest town next to us, but since Count Bastler always receives his pick first, we can only send small amounts at a time."

Oh... So only a little, huh?

"I'd love to learn more about your wine," I said, standing up. "We'd better put this doll back, so do you mind if I take a look around your storehouse while I'm there?"

"Why, by all means! In fact, I'm overjoyed to hear you've taken an interest in our humble trade."

They may be in the lumber and carpentry trade first and foremost, but they were clearly most proud of their wine. It was a little underhanded of me to use

their passion against them, but I had to get a closer look at the wine they stored there. If I was right, there might be evidence we could use against the Yugard store there.

I stopped to check Phillip's symptoms as I scooped up the doll. "All right, he seems to be doing better."

Hannes nodded. "His cough is gone, and his slumber appears far more restful now."

The capwort seemed to have worked, and his complexion was back to its normal hue. It seemed like we'd be fine leaving him for a while.

I stopped by the living room to talk with Hannes's wife before we left the house. "Excuse me? Do you have any more of that vegetable soup you made for breakfast? I'd appreciate it if you could give Phillip some when he wakes up."

"Of course! Actually, I was just about to start on lunch, so I'll ready a fresh bowl for him."

"Would you? Thanks."

The soup would be just the thing to help him recover. Better yet, it would double as a hangover remedy, given all the wine he'd drank the night before.

Oh, if only capwort could cure hangovers, too.

Hannes and I left the house, running into Leo and a group of children just outside.

"Ruff?" Leo noticed me and perked her ears with curiosity.

"Oh, Leo. Having fun with the kids?"

"Wooooo!" She began to bound toward me, but suddenly stopped halfway, hackles raising. "Grr...!"

"Whoa, what's wrong? Is everything okay?"

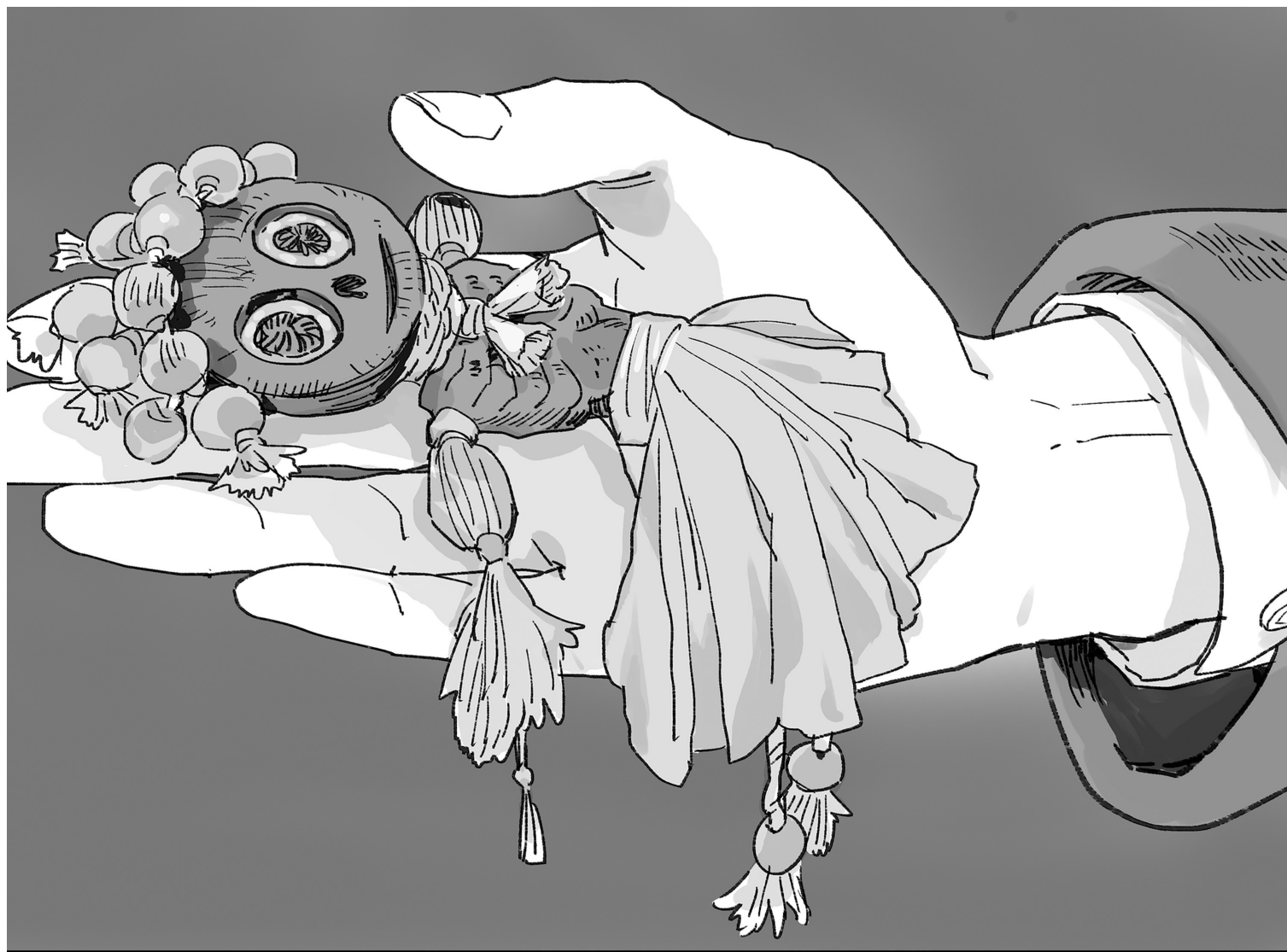
"Bark, bark! Grrrrrrrrr...!!"

Wait...she's not growling at me, is she?

"Is this what you're upset about?" I asked, holding out the doll.

“BARK! Bark, bark! Arooooooooo!!”

As soon as she laid eyes on the creepy doll, her barking reached a fevered pitch. Hannes froze up in terror beside me. Even the kids, who were simply confused before, were now shrinking away from her.



“Sorry, Hannes, can you hold this for a moment?” I handed the doll to him.

“I-If you insist. Is M-Miss Leo feeling all right?”

I smiled as reassuringly as I could. “Don’t worry, she’s not barking to scare you, and she won’t attack you no matter what.”

Hesitantly, he accepted the doll from me. As soon as it left my hand, Leo sat down.

“Wuff,” she sighed in relief.

I knew it. There’s something about that doll.

“Leo?” I called out to her, stroking her gently. “You’re starting to scare everyone. Can you let them know you’re not angry?”

“Ruff?” She looked around, stopping when she lay eyes on the kids. “Woof...” She drooped her head apologetically.

“So, what’s up, girl? There aren’t any monsters around here, right? Is there something wrong with that doll?”

She nodded. “Wooooo! Ruff, rrrroo-roo, growf!”

So, there is something special about the doll, and not something good from the sound of things.

“What is it you’re feeling from it? Is it like a monster?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Ruff. Worf, woo-woo, wuff!” *No, not like that. It’s like that bad smell at the orphanage and in the village, but way worse. It smells like danger. I didn’t mean to scare everyone, though...*

“Does the village still smell like that?”

“Ruff, ruff, wuff. Worf, woo-woo. Mwuff!” *Nope, not anymore. Only that weird doll.*

It only took me a moment to connect the dots.

“Is it infected with the same virus?” I asked her.

Leo vigorously shook her head yes. “Ru-ruff!”

In all the places Leo had picked up the scent, the illness had been present.

True, all those settings had children as well, but that wouldn't explain why Leo was totally fine with kids most of the time. Hannes and Rosalie weren't sick themselves, but the smell was on their clothes—proof that, as they'd said, they had caught the illness but recovered.

Since there were so many sick people in the village, does that mean this doll made them sick?

"The doll smells the strongest of all the places you've picked up on that scent, then? You're sure?" I asked for confirmation.

She nodded again. "Rooooooooooooooooo!"

"That still doesn't explain everything, though... And why this doll? What's going on here?"

Hannes approached me worriedly. "Is something the matter?"

From the way he was reacting, it looked like he was worried Leo might start barking at the doll again.

"Don't worry," I reassured him. "Leo's fine now."

"Are you sure? You certainly seem to be rather concerned."

I smiled, relaxing to show him I was okay. "Leo's all good. Right, girl?"

Leo nodded comfortingly. "Wuff!"

Her eyes were still fixed firmly on the doll in Hannes's hand, however, and I could tell it was still bothering her.

"If you insist," Hannes said with a sigh, visibly relaxing. "I must ask, however, what gives you such cause for worry?"

"Well, about that... We probably shouldn't put the doll back, after all. It's probably dangerous."

"This?" He held it up to take another look at it. "I'm afraid I don't understand. It was simply sitting in the storehouse."

He must've trusted the merchants who brought it a fair bit, since I could tell it hadn't even crossed his mind to suspect anything was wrong with it.

I guess that'd make sense. Even if they were different from their usual contact,

they brought the village their greital, and any deal on that level would require a lot of trust.

“Leo’s been acting strange because of that doll,” I explained. “She says it smells an awful lot like the illness.”

“Ruff, ruff, ruff!” she woofed in affirmation.

“This?” Hannes’s eyes grew wide in disbelief. “B-But...that can’t be...!”

I explained to him what I’d heard from Leo, plus my own guesswork. Leo nodded along the whole time, but Hannes seemed no more convinced than before.

“I want to make sure I get a few things straight, though,” I said. “When did the disease first break out here?”

Hannes thought for a moment, realization dawning. “The doll was brought here a little over a month ago—and the disease hit not long after. The first to become ill was a storehouse worker, and it spread little by little from there.”

“I was afraid of that.”

I didn’t know exactly when the Yugard store was founded, but it should’ve been a little over a month ago—in other words, right around when the doll arrived in Lange. Then, Yugard bought up all the medicine in town, meaning that when the epidemic started spreading soon after, they were the only supplier. As long as the disease kept spreading, they’d keep turning a profit. There were barely any sanitary measures in this world against infections, let alone face masks. If it spread like the regular flu did, there could be tons of people infected overnight.

It’s a little early to go making definitive conclusions, but considering Count Bastler’s involvement and this doll being the source of the outbreak, everything clicks into place.

“So, the doll caused all this ... Or no, wait. How could this little thing make people sick?” I muttered to myself. “Besides, even if Lange is where the outbreak began, it jumped to Ractos way too quickly. As far as I know, Hannes and Rosalie are the only people who’ve left since this all began.”

I was starting to attract some confused looks, but that didn't bother me.

If only I knew how the doll was doing it... Maybe it's just magic stuff that I'd never think of?

"The biggest question is how the disease got to Ractos..." I hummed.

The villagers weren't traveling after they got sick—it seemed like they could barely leave their beds.

How does that work, then?

I looked up at Hannes. "Between the time you first put that doll in your storehouse and now, has anyone gone to Ractos for any reason? Aside from you and Rosalie, of course."

"To Ractos? I should imagine so. We've sent several shipments of greital wine to the city, and multiple villagers with them. They're one of our biggest clients, after all."

"Okay... I think I get what happened now. Thanks."

The seemingly healthy villagers must have carried the virus with them, then. There must have been an incubation period between when they were infected and when their symptoms appeared, allowing them to infect the people of Ractos.

But wait, I can't imagine they had a lot of contact with people in town, and it's hard to think the sickness would spread as quickly as it has with that as the only factor at play. And why was the doll in the storehouse, anyways? If the doll infected people directly, it'd make more sense to put it somewhere with heavier traffic—heck, why not put it in Ractos directly?

"Agh, I just don't get it," I mumbled.

"Is everything all right?" Hannes asked me worriedly.

"No, it's not. I'm so close to figuring out the source of this whole outbreak, but things just aren't coming together right."

"The source?"

"Yeah. That doll arrived here just as the Yugard store opened, and then the

disease started spreading like wildfire. They *have* to be connected somehow.”

Hannes gave me a dubious look. “I’m not sure what you’re hoping to find.”

If I could only figure it out, then maybe we could stop this whole epidemic in its tracks...assuming it’s something we can deal with, of course.

As I continued to mull it over, Phillip came out of the house.

“Mr. Hirooka!” he called to me. “I’m so sorry about all the trouble I’ve caused you.”

“Oh, Phillip. How’re you feeling?”

“Much better, thanks to your capwort. I’ve got a headache still, but it has nothing to do with the illness.”

“Yeah, that’d be the hangover. You sure drank a lot last night.” He looked a lot better, at least. “But what’s that cup you’ve got here?”

“Oh, you know, a little hair of the dog.” He smiled. “It’s the best hangover cure I know.”

Sure enough, it was a glass brimming with greital wine.

Come to think of it, I remember hearing that drinking when you have a hangover can help lighten it, but drinking doesn’t cure hangovers. All it does is dull your sense of pain to the point where your head hurts less.

Phillip turned to Hannes and bowed. “Thank you for your hospitality as well. The soup your wife made warmed me up quite a bit, but I must confess I’m looking forward to another taste of your wine even more.”

Hannes chuckled, all traces of our previous conversation gone from his features. “All’s well and good. Our wine is our pride and joy, and seeing anyone enjoy it as you have is a pleasure.”

The soup wasn’t enough for him? I guess the wine was great, though, so I doubt I could stop him if I tried.

Just as Phillip brought the cup to his lips to drink, however, Leo sprang to her feet.

“BARK!”

Phillip nearly dropped his cup. “What?! M-Miss Leo?!”

“Eep!” Hannes flinched away.

Even I was taken aback. “Calm down, Leo! It’s okay, just relax.” I gave her a few reassuring strokes. “What’s wrong? It’s not like you to bark like that.”

Something must be wrong...

Phillip was frozen dead in his tracks, his gaze locked firmly on Leo.

“Ruff, ruff, woof. Roooooo!” *That wine stuff smells a little like the doll!*

That can’t be right, though, can it? That’d mean the wine smells like the disease.

“You’re sure about that, Leo? Positive?”

She nodded firmly. “RUFF.”

“Uh... Phillip?” I turned around to face him. “Don’t drink that.”

He shot me a baffled look. “Why not?”

“Leo says she’s picking up a bad smell from it. Hannes?”

Hannes seemed to snap out of his fear. “Y-Yes?”

Looks like Leo must’ve scared him senseless... She was only trying to warn us, though.

“I know this is a lot to ask, but could you bring out a few barrels of wine? There’s something I need to confirm.”

“What would that be?”

“I think the wine here might not be safe to drink anymore, and I need to check.”

“Our wine? Dangerous?!” Hannes looked deeply uncomfortable, but after a moment, he sighed. “I suppose hearing that from you bears cause for investigation. I shall gather some men immediately.” With that, he headed in the direction of the storehouse.

“Thanks. Sorry for the trouble,” I called after him.

It couldn’t have felt good to hear me accuse his village’s pride and joy like

that, but fortunately, he seemed willing to cooperate.

“Mr. Hirooka?” Phillip asked, still clutching his cup in one hand. He seemed thoroughly lost. “Could you explain to me what’s wrong with the wine now?”

“Well...you know how that fake apothecary opened in Ractos, right?”

“Yes, Sebastian’s told me. What about it?”

“Well, there’s a good chance we just figured out the connection between them and the disease, and how they’re spreading it.”

“Really?!” His eyes flew open in shock.

“Yep. Technically, though, Leo’s the one who figured it all out.”

I didn’t know why exactly, but for whatever reason, Leo decided the wine was as off-putting and dangerous as all the other places she’d sniffed out the illness. *As soon as Hannes gets back with the barrels, we should be able to prove my theory. None of this would’ve been possible without Leo.*

I decided to put off the rest of my explanation until after I had more evidence.

“I’ve brought the wine as you requested,” Hannes announced.

He brought five large barrels with him, each rolled along by two or three men. Each was roughly waist-high on a grown man, so they probably would be too heavy to just carry outright.

“Thanks, Hannes.”

“If I might ask, though, what are you intending to do with them?”

“Basically, Leo’s going to sniff them.”

“What will that achieve, exactly?”

“Leo’s very sensitive to dangerous smells. If there’s anything wrong with the wine, she’ll be able to sniff it out.” I led Leo closer to the barrels as I explained.

“Let me get something to pour the wine into,” Hannes suggested.

I shook my head. “No, that’s okay. I want to see if Leo can do it like this first. Go on, girl.”

“Ruff!”

I didn't know if she could get a good sense of the scent through the barrels, but it didn't hurt to try. If anything, it might be easier to tell, given the greater volume of wine. We could always pour her a cup of each if she couldn't tell.

"Wuff... *sniff sniff*... worf..."

She leaned in close to the barrels one by one and began sniffing them thoroughly. Hannes and the other villagers watched uneasily from a distance so as not to disturb her.

Just as Leo moved onto the third barrel, however, her attitude suddenly changed.

"BARK!"

Looks like I was right.

"How do the others smell?"

"Huff..." She went back to sniffing. After readily passing over the fourth barrel with a quick shake of her head, she stopped again at the fifth and last. "Woof? Bark!"

So she's picking up that dangerous smell from the third and fifth barrels.

"Wooooooooooooo! Grrr... Bark!"

I nodded understandingly. "Oh, I get it."

"Well?" pressed Phillip. "What did she say?"

"Basically, she said that two of the barrels have the same unpleasant smell as the doll and the wine you're holding."

"Wait... So, the wine smells like the disease?" he asked.

I nodded before turning to Hannes. "Is there anything different about the third and fifth barrels here?"

I was right about the wine being dangerous, but evidently, not every barrel was infected. There had to be something about the two dangerous ones.

"Those two have only been fermenting for a short while," Hannes explained. "The other three have been fermenting at the very back of the storehouse for quite some time now. Last night's wine was of the latter batch."

That would explain why Leo didn't react to the wine last night, then.

"So, about the two newer barrels... Where were they placed to ferment?"

"Both were close to the entrance. You see, we place the oldest wine at the very back of the cellar. The length of the fermentation process has a profound effect on the wine's scent and flavor alike, you see. We sell the wines at all stages of the fermentation to Ractos as different liqueurs."

"Okay... And you said the doll was right by the entrance?" I pointed at the eerie figure still in his hand.

"Yes indeed."

I had all the evidence I needed now to confirm my theory. I gave Leo a few grateful pats. "Thanks, girl. You've been a big help."

"Ruff!"

"So, what's going on?" Phillip asked, clearly at a loss.

Hannes nodded. "I would very much like to know that myself."

I'd barely told them anything so far, so I wasn't surprised they were curious.

"Okay, so this is partially just guesswork, but I think I've figured this whole thing out," I said as I removed my hand from Leo's flank to face them. "As you both probably know, there's a new apothecary in Ractos who's selling diluted medicines to people."

Phillip nodded. "Yes, I'm aware."

Hannes frowned slightly. "Rosalie and I nearly fell victim to their schemes ourselves."

"The most interesting thing about them," I continued, "is that they opened shop a month ago."

"A month?" I could see the realization dawn on Hannes's face. "Oh, my."

It was the same time the substitute merchants brought the doll to Lange, after all.

"Not long after that, the epidemic broke out in Ractos. That was also when it first hit Lange. Right, Hannes?" I asked to confirm.

He nodded. “Almost precisely.”

To be precise, though, the Yugard store had probably started their plot about two months ago, and the epidemic had likely been spreading a week or so before it was really discovered. That was when they first started buying out the city’s medicine supplies.

“They used the disease to push their own medicine sales, after making sure no other store in town had any stock,” I explained. “In fact, they likely just sold diluted forms of the other stores’ medicines.”

“Sebastian’s investigation found out that much, right?” Phillip chimed in.

“Exactly. The Yugard store needed to make sure the epidemic spread, though, or else they wouldn’t turn as much of a profit.”

Phillip nodded understandingly. “That’s a good point. Having a monopoly doesn’t guarantee they’ll make money.”

A successful monopoly needed a high demand, after all—especially since all the herbs and medicines they’d bought were at consumer price, not wholesale.

“That’s where the doll Hannes is holding comes in.”

Hannes raised the doll dubiously. “This?”

Phillip edged away from it, and I could see the gathered villagers were keeping their distance as well.

“I don’t know how it works, but that doll is the source of this entire epidemic. The disease came purely from that thing,” I asserted.

“Wh-What?!”

Hannes instantly recoiled away from it in terror, throwing it away from him. It thudded on the ground. I picked it up to examine it. The doll was surprisingly light and made of what felt like fragile wood, but the impact hadn’t left so much as a tiny crack in it.

I knew it. This thing’s not normal.

“It’s probably okay to touch,” I explained. “As far as I can tell, it only affects wine, or maybe wine barrels... At any rate, it doesn’t harm people directly.

Otherwise, Leo would be barking her head off at me for picking it up.”

Leo nodded sternly. “Woof!”

Seeing that, Hannes let out a sigh of relief.

I don't have any proof, of course, but that's the only explanation that makes real sense. If touching the doll infected people, the merchant who brought it here would've gotten sick himself.

“Since Leo says the greital wine has the same unpleasant smell as the doll, I bet that's how the epidemic has been spreading,” I deduced. “Anyone who drinks the wine catches it.”

Hannes's jaw dropped. “I can't believe it... Our beloved wine is at fault...?”

Looking around, most of the villagers looked every bit as shocked.

I can't blame them. They put their heart and soul into the wine, only to have it be used to hurt people.

“I'll bet the merchant who brought you the doll is in league with the Yugard store,” I continued.

“So that's how they knew when the disease would spread...”

Since greital wine was sold directly to Ractos, it would've been easy to predict when the outbreak would start. All Yugard had to do was make sure to have a monopoly in place by then. Whoever ran the Yugard store had to have been in contact with the merchant. There was also the common theme that the Yugard store was backed by *Count Bastler*, and the merchant came from his very domain.

I can't say for certain how involved Count Bastler is in the scheme, though, if at all.

“Our wine started this whole ordeal,” Hannes muttered despairingly. “We're practically responsible for everything...”

“You didn't do anything wrong,” I assured him. “The real villain is the merchant who gave you that doll.”

To be fair, though, I can understand how gut-wrenching hearing this must feel,

even if their wine itself isn't to blame.

“Phillip? Can you put this doll somewhere safe?” I requested. “Make sure it’s not touching anything else.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure? Perhaps we should destroy it instead?”

I shook my head. “It could be vital proof of what the Yugard store has been up to, so we’d better leave it in one piece for now. I’m sure Sebastian will know what to do with it.”

“Oh, I imagine he’ll be glad to put it to use,” he said wryly.

“Haha, yeah... You should take this too, just in case.”

“Capwort? I will.”

“If you feel even a little sick, take it right away, okay?” I stressed.

“Understood.”

“And no more drinking from the storehouse, you got it?” I stressed even more.

“Oh... Y-You see, when I was drunk last night, I ran into a fellow who invited me for a few more drinks today. Don’t worry, though, I won’t make the same mistake twice.”

With how drunk he was last night, I wasn’t surprised he’d stumbled into the storehouse and started drinking whatever happened to be closest to the entrance and the doll. Sleeping on the cold floor probably helped him get sick, too.

Even if one of the villagers offered him more, though, overdrinking is always a bad idea. I’ll have to watch out for stuff like that... Not that I can get drunk in the first place, for whatever reason.

“Even though Leo was able to sniff out the sickness and everything, I think you deserve a lot of credit for this discovery, too, Phillip,” I told him.

Phillip blinked in surprise. “Me? Why?”

“If you hadn’t passed out drunk in the storehouse, we might never have found that doll. I think that’s worth praising...the doll part, of course, not the

part where you got plastered.”

“Ahahaha... I’ll try to avoid overdrinking in the future.”

As we chatted, Phillip wrapped up the doll in a thick layer of cloth.

Honestly, though, it’s all thanks to Phillip that we found the source of the plague at all. I guess this is what you might call sleeping your way to victory, huh?

I wandered over to where Hannes and the other villagers were to check on them.

“Mr. Hirooka?” Hannes asked me sadly. “What should we do now? I feel simply awful for all the misery our wine has caused Ractos, but no amount of apologizing could ever make up for the damage we’ve caused.”

“Well... Let me think on it,” I said.

Even if I told them to just forget about it, they’d probably just keep on beating themselves up over the whole thing. Words were too cheap for guilt like theirs.

Man, I wish I could tell them something encouraging, though. I hate that I’m drawing a blank like this.

The best I could do for them was probably just helping to get their minds off of things and keep their hands moving.

“Let’s see... How about you start by bringing out all the barrels from the storehouse?” I suggested. “We need to make sure the rest of the wine’s safe first.”

“Y-Yes, of course. I’ll have every able body in the village working on it!” He immediately turned and led the villagers away.

“There’s no rush, though!” I called after him. “The doll’s out, so we don’t have to worry about any more wine getting infected!”

Whether or not he heard me, he didn’t slow down at all.

At least he’s being constructive now.

“Sorry for putting you to work so early, Leo, but could you check out the rest of the barrels too?” I asked her.

“Ruuuuff!”

The smell of it was bad enough to make her bark and growl, so I thought I should at least ask her permission before pushing the job onto her, but fortunately, she seemed raring to go.

Honestly, Leo's been a godsend this whole time. I'll have to ask Helena to cook her something special after we get back. Or maybe it'd be a good opportunity to treat her to more of Ractos's street food?

“I've finished wrapping the doll, Mr. Hirooka,” Phillip said, approaching me from behind. “What should I do now? Would you like me to take it to Sebastian right away?”

“Hm... That's a good question.”

I wanted to let Sebastian know what I'd discovered as soon as possible. *He might know what the doll is and how to deal with it properly. It seems like I still have some unfinished business in Lange, though.*

“Mr. Hirooka!” Hannes called out, rolling a few barrels with a handful of villagers. “My apologies for the wait. The barrels will be here shortly.”

“Great. You can look at them with Leo, then. If she growls or barks at a barrel, it's not safe to drink. Everything else can go right back into the storehouse,” I instructed.

“We're on it.”

“Okay, Leo, go do your thing. Make sure you're clear when you think a barrel is unsafe. If it smells okay, just ignore it. Sound good?”

“Ruff!”

As we chatted, more people showed up with barrels.

Wow, there sure are a lot of them. I'll have to reward Leo well for this.

While she got to work sniffing out the infection, I had to plan what my next move would be.

“Hannes? Do you mind if I ask you a thing or two about the merchant who brought the doll?” I asked him.

The merchant clearly knew what the doll did, but there wasn't anything concrete linking the two yet. I had to learn more about him.

"I imagine I could tell you a thing or two about our usual supplier," Hannes replied readily. "The substitute and his helper, however, I'm far less familiar with."

Right... They've only come by here once. It doesn't sound like it'll be easy to get reliable information on them, then.

"If I remember correctly, however, we're due to receive another shipment of greitals in two days' time," Hannes said.

"What? And you're sure it'll be the same people?"

He hesitated. "Well, no. I imagine our regular merchant will be back. A letter arrived from him not long before Rosalie and I left the village."

"Oh..."

Not the doll merchant, then. I guess I won't be able to question them directly.

According to Hannes, they received a shipment of greitals once every few months or so, and the merchant would always send a letter beforehand so the villagers would know to expect him. When they received word that the merchant was coming, Hannes realized they didn't have enough able bodies to handle all the incoming fruit, and that was what prompted the trip to Ractos for medicine.

If the merchant comes that infrequently, though, how come he's stopping by two months in a row? That sounds a little off.

Hannes also seemed to think it was a little unusual, but apparently, it had happened before. His best guess was that the merchant got an unexpected supply of quality greitals.

Still, the regular merchant may know something. I can't let this chance pass me by.

"Hannes? Do you mind if I meet the merchant when he arrives?" I asked.

He blinked. "I should imagine it won't be a problem. Is there anything specific you wish to know?"

“Well, I was thinking he might know something about the doll merchant.”

Ideally, I'd get his testimony as evidence, too.

“By all means,” Hannes replied. “You’re welcome to stay until the merchant arrives, as well as be present for all negotiations. I honestly doubt you’ll hear anything of interest to you, however.”

“Even so, I really appreciate it. Thanks.”

Their regular merchant was no doubt a trusted contact, and I could tell from the look on Hannes’s face that he couldn’t imagine him being involved in the Yugard plot.

I don't know how deep into this mess the merchant is, but he knows the guys who left the doll—that's enough to warrant a nice little chat.



“...**SO** basically, Phillip, I’ll be here in the village for the next few days.”

After finishing my talk with Hannes, I found Phillip and explained my plans to him.

He furrowed his brow. “I’m afraid I still don’t understand.”

“I need to talk to the merchant. He might have the answer we still need.”

I told him what Hannes and I had talked about. My job here had technically finished as soon as I handed over the capwort—but considering the merchant would probably get tightlipped around a duke’s guard, I had to be the one to do it.

Finally, Phillip agreed to my plan. “If you insist. This will delay our report to Sebastian and milady, though.”

“About that...”

“What?”

If I stay in Lange, then it makes more sense for someone else to go to the mansion in my stead, right?

I couldn’t ask the villagers, though, since they were already so busy with the whole greital wine issue. Besides, they might not be able to hold on to Leo

tightly enough to make the trip in good time. There was only one person for the job, then.

“I’d like you to ride back to the mansion without me,” I said.

He started with surprise. “Me? Ride Miss Leo? But I’m here to protect you. I can’t simply abandon you here.”

Right... I guess as soon as we made it to the village, his top priority went from protecting Hannes and Rosalie to protecting me. If he leaves with Leo, I’ll have to fend for myself.

“Why don’t you simply attach a letter to Miss Leo explaining the situation?” Phillip suggested. “If anything, I imagine that will be faster than having me ride her.”

I shook my head. “I thought about that, but you have to pass through Ractos to reach the mansion, remember? Leo can’t exactly do that alone.”

“Oh, I’d almost forgotten. That would cause something of a panic, wouldn’t it?”

Anyone who knew Leo probably wouldn’t bat an eye, but the rest of the city would be in a total uproar if they saw a wolf her size tearing through the streets. Asking her to cut through the forest south of Ractos was also an option, but she’d never been there before, and I didn’t want to risk her getting lost. Besides, there was only so much information I could put in a letter, and Leo couldn’t explain anything by herself.

“I’ll be fine on my own,” I reassured him. “Lange is a very safe place, and I doubt I’ll get attacked by anyone or anything here. Besides, I’ve been making great progress with my sword training, and I know magic now, too.”

Technically, that light spell counts as knowing magic.

Even if things did go south suddenly, Sebastian had taught me the importance of running away, so even in the worst-case scenario, I’d probably be fine. The villagers were all nice and friendly, too, so I couldn’t imagine any of them turning on me. I honestly couldn’t see any need for a bodyguard.

Phillip frowned. “This village certainly *does* seem safe...”

“Doesn’t it? They’ve been very welcoming, and they’re all generous. Besides, there’s no guarantee none of them drank infected wine last night, so I should probably stay here for a while and cultivate some capwort just in case. Don’t worry, I won’t do anything dangerous.”

Finally, he let out a heavy sigh. “Fine, you win. I’ll depart for the mansion immediately, and as soon as I’ve conveyed your findings, I’ll ride right back. Just promise me you’ll take care of yourself.”

“Don’t worry, I will.”

I had every intention of relaxing and growing a little more capwort, so I wouldn’t be overextending myself in any sense. The only thing I had to do now was wait for Leo to finish going through the last barrels, congratulate her, and send her on her way with Phillip.

I’ll ask him to get Leo a whole feast when they arrive. I’d be totally lost without her.

After a while, Leo plodded toward me, tail wagging proudly.

“Ruff, ruff!”

“Done already, girl? Thanks a lot! You’re the best!”

“Arooo!”

I gave her a thorough petting and fed her a few links of sausages that Hannes and his wife had brought out for her.

She did extra good work today, so she deserves a treat.

Hannes bowed deeply to us. “Thank you both for all that you’ve done for our humble village.”

“So, how many barrels do you have left?” I asked.

“Let’s see...” He turned to count, then faced me again. “Around twenty, it seems.”

“Oh... Only that many, huh.”

Just at a glance, it looked like a stack of ten or so barrels was separated from the rest. I was glad to see that there was still plenty of drinkable wine left, but

to a small village like Lange, losing a third of their profits had to hit hard.

I'll ask Claire if there's anything we can do for them when we get back, I thought as I watched the villagers return the twenty safe barrels to the storehouse.

"Anyhow, we should probably quarantine the infected barrels so that nobody gets too close by accident," I suggested.

"Yes, I believe that would be for the best."

"I bet you're tired after all that sniffing, Leo, but there's one more thing I need to ask you for," I told her.

"Wurf? Ruff, ruff, fruff!" Me? I'm not tired at all!

If anything, she was eager to do more for me.

Does she really enjoy being relied on this much?

"Well, uh... I need you to take Phillip back to the mansion as quickly as you can."

"Wuff. Ruffa...?"

"Me? No, I'll be staying here."

"Whine..."

"Don't worry, I'll be fine. No need to worry about thugs or ruffians here, after all. If you're that worried, you can try to make it there and back faster."

She nodded. "Woof!"

I could tell that she was curious as to what I'd be doing without her, though. I smiled, just to put her at ease.

"Don't forget, though, Phillip will be riding you, so try not to shake him off. Okay?"

"R-Ruff..."

Her tail drooped, and I could tell from the look in her eyes that she had honestly forgotten he'd be there at all, she was so worried about me.

I just know she'd send people flying if she ran all-out. I'd rather not see Phillip

get hurt.

With that, Phillip went to get ready for their trip back while Leo and I went to explain things to Hannes.

“...So basically, I’d like to stay here a few more days. Is that okay with you?”

“Oh, of course! You’re welcome to stay in our humble little settlement for as long as you please. From your handling of our infirmed to ensuring our wine is safe, we owe you our lives. You’ll always be welcome here.”

After a short while, Phillip returned with a supply-laden pack. “Thank you both for your patience. May I climb aboard, Miss Leo?”

“Ruff.”

With that, he climbed up onto her back. I could tell he was shaking a little, since this was his first time riding Leo, but given his experience with horses, I knew he’d be fine.

“Oh, and take this,” I said as I passed a bag up to him.

Phillip peeked inside. “Is this capwort?”

I’d taken the time to make a little extra while Leo was sorting through the barrels. Since almost all the adults in the village were focusing on the barrels, and all the kids had their eyes on Leo, I had enough of an opening to sneak behind Hannes’s house and grow a few things.

“Yep. Since I’ll be late returning to the mansion, I want to make sure Kales’s store doesn’t run out of stock. There’s several days’ worth in there, so that should be enough to tide them over. Oh, and if you or anyone else starts showing symptoms after touching the doll...”

“I’ll ensure they receive some. Understood.”

“Thanks, and good luck.” Then I turned to where Leo was lying down and gave her a good scratch behind the ears. “Okay, girl, you know what to do. Go fast, but not so fast you drop Phillip on the way.”

“Wooooo!” She nodded at me, then stood up. Phillip swayed uneasily on her back.

“P-Please be gentle with me.”

“Just let Leo know if she’s going too fast,” I told him. “And Leo, make sure to listen to what he says.”

I could see her going even faster than she did with me, and that’d be a little rough on a first-timer like Phillip.

“Ruff, ruff.”

“Understood,” he said with a nod. “I won’t let her shake me off. Rest assured, we’ll reach the mansion as soon as possible. Until we return, stay safe.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”

“Arooo!”

With an eager howl, Leo shot off down the road like a rocket.

“Wh-Whoa, that was fast... Maybe slow down a little, Leo!” I called after them.

In the blink of an eye, both Phillip and Leo were totally out of sight.

I guess Leo’s that determined to get back here... Or maybe she’s just enjoying the run? Either way, faster is better.

“All right, then,” I said as I turned back to Hannes.

“Yes?”

“Just in case, you should have these.”

I handed him the rest of the capwort I was carrying.

He looked at me in confusion. “But I thought the epidemic was over here?”

“We’ve set aside the bad wine for now, but there’s no guarantee that nobody drank any last night or this morning. Besides, there might still be some sick people around, they just haven’t started showing symptoms yet. It never hurts to be careful,” I stressed.

“Ah, I see. I’m sure that if His Grace’s own apothecary believes so, you must be right.”

I’m not an apothecary...but I guess I’m close enough to one at this point.

Besides, I can't correct him without telling him about Herb Cultivation.

"Oh, right! I almost forgot. Is there any place around here—preferably outside—where nobody would be able to see me?" I asked. "A few clean handkerchiefs or something would be nice, too."

He gave me a confused look. "An isolated place outside? I'd imagine behind my house would be the best place. It's right on the village's edge, and nobody passes through there. What are you planning to do, though?"

"I thought I'd do a little work while I waited. I don't want to just sit around and do nothing, after all."

"Why, none of us would mind one bit if you took some time to relax. If you're that determined, however, you're free to use the space however you wish. We'll make sure you have your privacy—oh, and I'll take you your handkerchiefs right away."

"Thanks, and sorry for the trouble."

Fortunately, he didn't seem too curious. He probably thought I'd be doing some important noble business, which I technically was. After making some more herbs, though, I was just planning on getting in a bit more sword practice.

Just as Hannes turned to leave, however, my stomach let out a loud growl.

Hannes stopped, then turned back to smile faintly at me. "I'll have lunch started as well."

"Th-Thanks," I replied sheepishly.

Now that I think about it, I haven't eaten anything since waking up. I wish my gut would stop embarrassing me like this, though...



"**PLEASE**, help yourself," Hannes said as he brought out the food. "We had some of the village's best chefs work on this."

"Thanks. I'm sure it'll taste great."

We were sitting out in the town square where the banquet had been held the night before. Apparently, Hannes would often eat out in public so that he could

keep an eye on the village as he ate. It was far past noon now, but the sun was still high in the sky, and it was admittedly nice to be able to see the villagers going about their day while we ate. Now that the shadow of the epidemic was gone, everyone seemed to be in high spirits.

“By the way, Hannes, I know that it’s not really any of my business, but is Lange going to be okay? Financially, I mean.”

Losing that much wine had to be a heavy blow, and even though it wouldn’t hurt me directly, I couldn’t help but feel worried.

“Well...to be honest, it will most certainly put a dent in our coffers. We should make it out none the worse in time, but for a while, we’ll have to budget what we have left carefully.”

“Oh... I’m sorry to hear that.”

They wouldn’t have sold all ten barrels immediately, so the damage probably wouldn’t hit them all at once, but that was still a significant number of greitals and a good deal of effort gone.

“Hmm...” I hummed to myself.

I thought the situation over between mouthfuls of food. The village depended on the wine for their livelihood. I didn’t know the first thing about making alcohol, but it sounded like they’d lost several months’ worth of profits at least. Worse yet, if word got out that the wine was the source of the plague and they had to throw the rest of it away as well, it’d be a waste of a great drink, to say the least.

“Maybe they can raise the price?” I muttered to myself. “No, that’d make it too unaffordable... Keeping the price the same would probably be for the best...”

Hannes gave me a look of concern. “Is anything the matter? Is the food perhaps not to your liking?”

I shook my head. “No, it tastes great! Thanks again for the food.”

“Oh, no, it’s the least we can do. Providing you with good food during your stay is but a small token of our thanks.”

Lunch tasted every bit as good as breakfast and dinner had the night before, and while it wasn't fancy by any stretch, it made up for that in flavor. It reminded me of a home-cooked meal, and honestly, I was impressed they could make anything so good in the village's current state.

Still, I guess there's not much I can do for the villagers myself... The best thing I can do for them is confront the merchant when he arrives.

With that, I focused on my meal.



AFTER lunch, I focused on making herbs and doing some light training while I waited for the merchant to arrive. Since Leo was gone, I even played with the kids a little in her stead, but I sort of regretted it when the fatigue set in.

Seriously, do kids ever run out of energy?

They had more life in them than I did, even after all my working out, and I couldn't help but feel a little jealous.



"I'M going to do a little bit more training, then head to bed," I told Hannes.

"Pleasant dreams, Mr. Hirooka."

It was the night before the merchant was supposed to arrive, and after taking a short post-dinner break, I said goodnight to Hannes and headed out back to do my usual post-dinner practice swings. After I finished, I wiped my sweat off with a damp towel and headed back inside.

"They don't have baths out here, do they...?" I muttered.

Even though the mayor's house seemed bigger and a little more extravagant than the rest of the village, they didn't have a proper bathroom.

I guess that's normal in this world, though.

After I was as clean as I was going to get, I crawled into bed.

"Come to think about it, I haven't slept without Leo in ages..."

When I'd first taken her in, she was so weak that I had to spend all night taking care of her.

Man... Those were different times.

Ever since then, she'd always slept on or beside my bed. She was tiny enough that sometimes she'd squirm under my blankets when I was asleep, and when I woke up, she'd be curled up on my chest.

If she tries that now, though, I'd die.

We hadn't slept apart in this world either. The rooms in Claire's mansion were big enough to fit Leo wherever she went, and even in the Fenrir Forest, she was always at my side. And even though she couldn't come into the tent during our last expedition, Sebastian and the others were there, so I still wasn't alone.

"I'm too old to get lonely at night, though...right?"

I thought about Leo to distract myself. We'd been taking care of each other for ages now, and while we ran into a few issues, they only made my memories all the fonder. I could feel myself smiling as I drifted off to dreamland.



THE next day, I woke up just as the sun was rising. *I bet Leo's headed back here now*, I thought idly as I cleaned myself up. I left the bedroom just as Hannes and his wife seemed to finish making breakfast.

"Good morning," I greeted them.

"Good morning, Mr. Hirooka! Breakfast is served, if you would like to partake."

I sat down and had breakfast with them, and after that, I went for a morning jog to loosen up my muscles. According to Hannes, the merchant always arrived just after lunch, so I decided to cultivate a few herbs while I waited.

However, as lunch came and went, there was still no sign of the merchant.

"This is strange," Hannes muttered as he glanced out the window at the sky. The sun was already beginning to set. "He should certainly be here by now."

If what Hannes said is true, then he's running really late... I hope he's okay.

Just as we were starting to worry, though, Rye burst in through the door.

"Mayor Hannes!" he shouted. "The merchant's here!"

“Ah, good!” Hannes exclaimed. “It seems as though we had nothing to worry about after all.”

Finally... I wonder what kept him so long, though?

Rye seemed a little troubled. “It’s not the usual guy, though.”

“It isn’t? Who is it, then?”

“I dunno. Dad’s talking to ’em at the gate now.”

Right, Rye lives right by the village gates. Makes sense that his family would be the first point of contact for visitors, then.

“Have you ever seen them before?” I asked him.

He nodded. “Yeah, just once.”

Something clicked in my head, and I could feel a knot form in my stomach. I leaned over to whisper in Hannes’s ear. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

Hannes nodded. “It may well be the merchant who gave us the doll. As Rye met him, I should imagine he remembers the fellow.”

What’s he doing back here, though? He should know that if the doll ever gets found out, he’s the primary suspect. Does he have a second doll? Or maybe he’s checking to see how the disease has spread? Maybe he doesn’t know anything about the doll’s effects, and he’s just a middleman?

No matter what the answer was, however, I’d only find it coming from the merchant himself.

I turned to Hannes. “I know I said I wanted to question the merchant directly, but I think I should stay out of sight. He could probably tell I’m not from around here, and we don’t want him to get suspicious.”

“Ah, understood. In that case, I will question him myself.”

“Pretend you don’t know anything about the doll...or actually, act like the epidemic never hit here at all.”

He gave me a puzzled look but nodded. “If you say so.”

With that, we both left the house, and we parted ways about halfway through the village so that I could sneak around the long way. The merchant might well

slip up and say something useful if he was just talking to Hannes, but he'd probably be tightlipped around me. I just had to hide close enough to hear their conversation.

I crouched down behind Rye's house.

Okay... Hopefully, I'll be able to hear what they're saying from here.

It was close enough to the village gates to be barely within earshot but still out of sight. Fortunately, the setting sun was casting long, dark shadows across the village, which would hopefully help me hide.

I know this isn't really a stealth mission, but I can't help remembering those old spy video games I used to play. Of course, if I tried any fancy spy tricks here, I'd get caught in a heartbeat. I'm no professional.

"Oh, right! I can use that!"

I remembered a certain herb I kept on me for emergencies and took a moment to fish it out of my bag. It was the same sense-enhancing plant I'd shared with Claire and the others in the Fenrir Forest.

I braced myself, then popped it into my mouth. "Yech... It sure tastes awful... At least I can hear them better now."

The herb took effect almost instantly. I could barely hear a thing before, but now I could make out the merchant's individual footsteps, the braying of the horses, and even the gentle rustling of the distant trees.

Now I should be able to hear what they're saying.

"The hell?" I heard a man's voice mutter from just beyond the village gates. "I know I... How...?"

His voice was so low that I still couldn't make out his every word, but I could tell he was flustered. It was probably the doll merchant. Even through the deepening gloom, I could make out a few figures by the gate.

"Those are Rye's parents... Oh, and that man a short distance away from them has to be the merchant," I muttered to myself.

It looked like he was simply standing and watching the village, and he wasn't making any attempt to get closer or talk to Rye's parents. I couldn't make out

his expression either, so all I could do was guess. Behind the merchant was a pair of covered wagons hitched up to horses.

I bet the greitals are all in there.

“Something feels wrong about this, though...”

I wish Leo was here... She could probably tell me a lot more, but getting the word to Sebastian is probably more important overall. No, I've got to do this myself!

Steeling my resolve, I focused my attention on the merchants. I watched as Hannes walked right up to the group.

“My apologies for the wait,” I heard him say.

Even though I was as quick as I could be, I bet he was slower on purpose so that I could get into position.

He cast a glance over at me to make sure I was in place.

Yeah, I'm here! Stop giving me away!

“Sorry we took so long to get here,” said the merchant. “One of our wagons got caught in a rut, you see.”

“Ah, I understand. I'm glad you were still able to make it on time.”

That would make sense, I guess. I bet a wagon laden with heavy stuff would take a lot of work to get moving again if it got stuck.

“Something's still not right,” I whispered to myself. “He's a fruit merchant, right? So why does it sound like there are things moving around inside the wagon?”

Aside from the horses and the five people at the gate, I couldn't see anyone there. The more I listened, though, the clearer it became that there were multiple creatures in the back of the wagon, and from the sound of their erratic breathing, they weren't human. They were animalistic, but decidedly different from the horses' sounds, and it seemed as though they were attempting to stay quiet.

If only Leo was here... She'd know what's in there.

“So, how are the greitals?” Hannes asked. “A good crop, I hope?”

“Uh, yeah. A real good crop,” the merchant echoed.

“Ah, thank goodness! I’m quite glad to hear it. If you don’t mind my asking, though, where’s the man who usually delivers them?”

“Uh... He’s...busy. Yeah, something suddenly came up, so we had to come instead.”

So the usual guy isn’t here, after all. I guess this guy and his assistant by the wagons are subbing in for him again? But why does the merchant seem so nervous? If he’s just an anxious guy, I can respect that, but I hope there’s nothing else going on.

“Well, then, why don’t you show me your fruit?” Hannes asked.

I could make out the merchant nodding. “Sure, sure. You, uh, seem to be doing well. Very healthy.”

“Oh, of course! Thanks to that charm you gave us on your last visit, our wine is better than ever. The entire village is full of life!” Hannes exclaimed, keeping up the act.

“G-Glad to hear it. You, uh, put it where I told you to, right?”

“Of course. Why, it’s sitting there right now, the cute little thing.” Hannes cast me another glance, as if to make it clear he was laying a trap for them.

“Y-Your wine... You’ve been drinking it, too, right?”

“Naturally. We need to ensure it’s good enough to sell, after all. It’s our pride and joy, and we make a habit of drinking it on the norm.”

“Huh. Okay.” The man then continued in a whisper that only I could hear, “... Why isn’t it working...?”

I knew it. The merchants knew all along what the doll does, and they planted it here on purpose so that the virus would spread. They’ve got to be in league with the Yugard store, and maybe the count, too.

I stroked my chin. “So, they’re confused as to why everyone isn’t sick, then.”

They were likely expecting the entire village to be out of commission. That

would explain why they were surprised to see Rye's parents and Hannes looking so healthy.

No wonder he sounds so surprised, then.

"Is something the matter?" Hannes asked innocently.

"N-No, nothing!" The merchant jumped. "So, uh, lemme show you the greitals."

I listened as they started talking shop with Hannes, discussing how many the village would buy and at what price.

"No... Something is definitely wrong here," I muttered.

What stuck out to me most, though, was how many greitals the merchant claimed to have brought.

The wagons could probably fit that many fruits if they were empty, but not with all the...whatever-they-are in the back.

I decided to sneak a little closer and try to peek inside the wagon. It was dark enough now that I'd be hard to spot at a glance. I managed to get close enough that I could've made out their conversation even without the herb's assistance, but since Rye's folks were between them and me, I was still relatively hidden.

There are living things in those wagons, no doubt about it... I can even clearly hear them breathing now.

They muttered to each other in inhuman voices, and I caught a faint whiff of some bestial odor on the wind.

No, wait... I know this sound. Where have I heard it, though...? It hit me a second later, and it was all I could do to keep from shouting, "No...!"

I clamped my hands over my mouth and glanced around to see if anyone noticed me, but fortunately, I hadn't slipped up quite that badly. Only Hannes shot me a confused look.

No, that doesn't matter right now.

The last time I'd met the residents of the wagons, I was deep in the Fenrir Forest. Leo had no problem with them, but the stakes were different now.

There are monsters...no, orcs in those wagons! But why?

Orcs were supposed to attack humans on sight—I'd witnessed it myself multiple times on our forest expedition. But somehow, the orcs hidden in the wagons seemed perfectly placid, and they showed no signs of struggling. If anything, they seemed *excited* about something, and I could catch the faint clattering of metal on metal.

Are they chained together or something? Why are the merchants transporting orcs, though? Are they merchandise, too?

Claire and Sebastian never mentioned monsters being bought or sold before, but it didn't seem too far-fetched. That failed to explain why there weren't enough greitals in the wagons, though. They certainly had some, since the merchant had taken a box of them from the back to show them to Hannes, and I could smell them from here.

I was afraid of this, I thought as things started to click into place for me.

There was only one explanation to account for the missing greitals and the orcs both, and it wasn't a good one. Unfortunately, Hannes and the merchant were already wrapping up their business.

"Here's the amount we agreed upon," Hannes said as he held out a pouch of coins.

"Th-Thanks." The merchant took the bag. "Hey! Get over here!"

"Yeah, yeah," grumbled the man who'd been standing quietly by the wagons. He took the money from the merchant and counted it out. "Yep, this is enough."

"Good." The merchant cleared his throat awkwardly and turned back to Hannes. "Well, Mr. Mayor, it was a pleasure doing business with you. The greitals are yours."

"Excellent. May we have them now?"

"Sure. Uh, let me get right on it."

From this distance, I could easily make out the doll merchant's portly figure. His eyes were wandering awkwardly the whole time he talked with Hannes,

probably still shocked to find the village in good health.

“L-Let them all out,” the merchant muttered to his assistant in a low voice. “The doll didn’t work, so we’re releasing every last one of those buggers.”

The assistant smirked faintly. “Aye-aye, sir!”

“Wait!” I shouted, leaping out of the shadows.

I can't let them set the orcs free! Who knows how much damage they'd cause?!

“Wh-Who in blazes are you?!” the merchant barked in surprise.

“Mr. Hirooka?!” Hannes cried in shock.

Fortunately, the assistant also stopped dead in his tracks to gawk at me.

“Hannes, the wagons are full of orcs!” I shouted. “There are barely any greitals at all in there!”

“What?!” Hannes turned to the merchant.

He started with surprise. “D-Dammit!”

“Just what are you trying to pull?!” I shouted at him.

That many orcs would pose a massive threat to the villagers.

The merchant’s expression soured. “Tch... If only you’d gotten sick and stayed in bed, I could’ve grabbed our little toy and let the orcs clean up the mess!”

He was probably referring to the doll, but that wasn’t our biggest concern. He’d just admitted he tried to destroy the entire village. If the villagers were still sick, they’d be powerless to resist the orcs.

No... A bunch of orcs is a big threat even now.

Hannes froze in terror. “You planned to sic *orcs* on us?!”

“Are you trying to get everyone killed?!”

“E-Enough!” The merchant barked. “Unleash the orcs!”

“Got it, boss!” The assistant ran for the back of the wagons.

“Stop!” I bolted after him as fast as my legs would carry me.

“Mr. Hirooka!” Hannes shouted after me.

Hannes and the merchant were standing near the gate, however, and I was behind Rye’s parents along the north side of the fence.

I won’t make it in time!

“Stop!” I cried, drawing my blade as I ran.

The assistant didn’t so much as hesitate, and in seconds he was at the wagons.

“Don’t do it!” I pleaded.

The assistant cackled. “Okay, little piggies! Time for some fun!”

“GWEUUUUUURGH!!”

With a horrendous battle cry, the orcs exploded out of the back of the wagon, the loud clattering of loose chains heralding their newfound freedom.

“Th-Things got a little knocked out of order, but fine! Let’s get outta here!” the merchant shouted to his assistant.

“Yessir!”

As the orcs escaped, the merchant hurriedly unhitched the horses from the front of the wagon, and both he and his accomplice mounted their steeds and rode off fast as they could.

“Dammit!” I cursed through gritted teeth.

“Mr. Hirooka!” Hannes called out to me, but I didn’t have the time to waste replying. I would’ve loved to chase after the merchant—but the orcs were already blocking my path.

“This is bad... All right, let’s go! Light Elemental Shine!”

Clamping my eyes shut, I unleashed the spell that Sebastian had taught me. I wasn’t like Leo—I couldn’t handle a whole group of orcs in a fair fight. My best shot was to blind them and run.



“SQUEORGH?!”

Fortunately, the setting sun had left the entire gate area dark, and nearly all of the orcs recoiled in shock and pain from the bright light.

Thanks again for teaching me this, Sebastian. You're a lifesaver.

I ran back toward the gate to where Hannes and the others were frozen in surprise. “Hannes, run!” I shouted.

“M-Mr. Hirooka!” he stammered back, pointing with a shaky finger. “O-O-Orcs!”

“The merchant had them in his wagons from the start,” I hurriedly explained. “He was planning this! You’ve got to get out of here, now!”

“Y-Yes... Yes, of course.” He nodded a few times, and I could see a little color return to his face. “I’ll let everyone know right away. Come!”

Rye’s parents snapped out of their daze at his command. “O-Of course!”

The two of them ran back into the village.

Good... I'm glad they're so quick to act.

“What about you? Aren’t you coming?!” Hannes asked me.

“I...I need to buy you guys some time. Just focus on getting all the villagers out okay!”

I couldn’t tell how many orcs there were exactly, but there had to be at least a dozen. I had no idea how long I could hold them off, but with any luck, I could lead a few of them away, at the very least.

Now I'm really regretting Leo not being here.

“You can’t be serious!” Hannes shouted. “We can’t leave you behind!”

“If I don’t stay, they’ll get into the village. Somebody needs to keep them busy.”

There were tons of children and elderly folks living there that would have a hard time getting out in any decent amount of time. If I ran with them, there’d be casualties for sure. No, I had to stay and hold them off.

“Gweooooorh!” came an orc’s roar from behind the carriage.

“Dammit! They’re coming!”

A single orc came charging toward us. It must’ve been behind the carriage when I cast the spell and didn’t get blinded as a result.

“Mr. Hirooka!”

“Go, Hannes!” I shouted, turning to face the monster. “I’ve got this!”

“Gwooorh!”

It lunged at me in a full-body tackle, but I was able to sidestep out of the way at the last second, cutting a deep gash in its arm as it passed. The orc wasn’t anywhere near as fast as Eckenhart or Leo, but I still wound up cutting it closer than I would’ve liked.

I probably have the sense-enhancing herb to thank for that.

I was a little surprised I was able to hurt it so readily when I’d never really fought a monster before. I probably had Sebastian’s earlier lecture on monsters to thank for that.

“Squeargh?!” It grabbed at its wound, looking down at it for a moment before glaring at me with its beady, bloodshot eyes.

Good. At least it’s focusing on me.

I could hear Hannes scrambling inside the village, as well as the tolling of the belltower. Someone had sounded the alarm.

“Sqeooooorh!”

The orc let out a war cry as it raised its uninjured arm to strike me. Its movements were a little numbed, probably from the pain, but I could tell it was putting its full body into that ham-fisted strike. Fortunately, I didn’t have any trouble dodging out of the way.

“This is one hell of a first fight!”

As the orc stumbled to regain its balance, I swung my short sword down right at its head. Blood spurted readily out of the wound, but I couldn’t split its skull like I was hoping.

I am still a newbie... Maybe I should've aimed somewhere else?

It stumbled a little, but it was still standing.

"I can't afford to waste this much time on just one of them... Dammit!" I cursed.

I took a second swing while it was struggling to regain its balance. I was aiming for its neck, but it stumbled back at the last moment, causing the tip of my blade to only graze its chest.

No... Maybe I'm not as confident about this as I thought. Maybe there's a part of me that still doesn't want to fight.

If I didn't finish the orc off now, though, I'd get overwhelmed by the rest of them. I could hear the rest of the orcs snapping out of their daze, and once they did, I wouldn't stand a chance.

"Just lay down and give up already!" I shouted, hacking at the orc again and again.

"Squee...sqwourgh..."

After a few more clean hits, it let out a low growl and thudded heavily to the ground, unmoving.

"Hahh... Finally..." I gasped for air as I waited, ready to finish it off if I had to.

As I caught my breath, however, I spotted the bulk of the orc pack headed right for me.

Crap... And here I thought I could lead them off the road to buy the villagers more time. No way I can pull that off now.

"Time for another spell, then. Light Elemental—"

At that moment, however, an axe came flying from behind me, hitting the closest orc square in the chest.

"Gweoorgh!"

The rest of the pack stopped in confusion, hurriedly looking around for the new attacker.

"What on Earth?" I mumbled.

“Mr. Hirooka!” came a familiar voice from behind me.

I turned around to find not only Hannes standing there, but a good handful of the villagers as well.

“Hannes... I thought I told you all to run?” I panted.

He smiled wistfully at me. “You did, but where would we be if we lost the chance to repay our debt to you? You’ve saved our lives—it’s only right that we offer you the same courtesy.”

“We’re with you, sir!” shouted one of the men.

“I won’t give up on this village!” came another cry.

“We can’t leave you behind!” went a third.

They were armed with all manner of short swords, lumber axes, and knives that looked thoroughly out of place in the hand of the kind villagers I’d come to know. A few of them even had hoes and other tools, probably for lack of better options. I hadn’t been fighting for very long yet, but Hannes had gathered a good number of villagers and weapons in that time.

“No, there are too many orcs! I can’t let you risk yourselves like this,” I protested.

Hannes shook his head. “Even so, we mustn’t back down now. We’ve fought many a monster in the past, both to protect our village and our livelihood in the forest.”

One of the villagers flexed. “You bet! Besides, that was a pretty good throw, wasn’t it? It wasn’t just a lucky hit, I swear!”

“We can handle a smelly little orc or two!” cried another.

All of them, even Hannes, seemed serious about fighting.

They’re right. I mean, there were trollds on the road here—monster attacks can’t be that rare. If they’re as experienced as they say, it’d be great to have them on my side, but still...

Even as we talked, I could see more and more villagers come out with whatever weapons they could find around their homes.

“What if you get hurt, though?” I asked.

“Losing you would be a greater loss than any of us,” one of them replied firmly.

“Yeah! We can handle a few scrapes and bruises! There’s no replacing you if you go down, though!”

“What’re we supposed to tell Lady Claire if you don’t make it? We sat and watched you die? Fat chance!”

I shook my head in disbelief. “I... I don’t know what to say.”

I was genuinely grateful they wanted to help—but if even one of them didn’t make it out alive, I didn’t know what I’d do. Behind me, however, I could hear the orcs resume their charge.

“It seems we’re out of time, Mr. Hirooka. Will you have us or not?”

Hannes’s words were the last little push I needed.

“I guess I can’t exactly ask you to turn tail and run now... All right, then, we’ll all fight together! Just promise me you won’t get yourselves killed!”

“YEAHH!” came the villagers’ cry in return.

I would’ve preferred it if they’d used the orcs’ moment of confusion to run away, of course, but at this point, they wouldn’t be able to escape if they tried. The best I could do was make sure everyone was ready. I could heal most injuries with loe, but I seriously doubted I could make an herb to bring back the dead.

I’d rather avoid losing anyone here... I don’t want that on anyone’s conscience.

We likely outnumbered the orcs now, so I hoped it wouldn’t get too gristly. But as much as I would’ve loved to hop right on the villagers’ hype train, this wasn’t a game—this was real life, and getting hurt or even killed was a real possibility.

“SQEEEEAAAAAARGHH!!” howled the orcs as they barreled toward us.

“C’mon, let’s show ’em what Lange is made of!”

“Team up, everyone!” Hannes commanded. “Don’t try to take on an orc

without a friend or two to watch your back!”

Taking another look at the enemy’s numbers, it seemed like not all the orcs were focusing on us. A few of them had split off to target the horses that were still hitched to the wagons and hadn’t managed to escape. I felt horrible for them, but at least the scales were tipped a little more in our favor now.

“Orcs like to charge in straight lines!” I called out as I observed the pack. “Taking a direct hit will send you flying, so dodge to the side!”

If these orcs were anything like the one I’d just killed, they shouldn’t be too hard to dodge as long as we all stayed calm and read their moves. Teaming up should make it even easier to play it safe and wear them down little by little.

“SQEEEEARRRH!”

“Now, take ’em down!”

“Looks like I’m goin’ from cuttin’ down trees to cuttin’ down orcs!”

“I’ve killed monsters in the woods before! An orc or two is nothin’!”

The first orcs to reach us were the ones right in front of the village gate. The villagers were able to avoid the initial charge, then surrounded the monsters and started hacking at them from all sides.

I bet this is their usual tactic for killing monsters... They seem pretty good at it. This isn’t their first rodeo.

“I’m not about to be shown up, though!”

I dodged the heavy swipe of the orc that charged at me, taking a slash at its arm as I went. If I could take one of their arms out of commission first and slow them down a little, I could probably take them one-on-one.

I guess I’m not good enough to take their arm clean off, though...

“Hahh...hahh...”

I gasped for breath as I felled my third orc. I could manage them without too much trouble since I was faster than them, and the herb I’d taken did wonders for my reflexes, but I was starting to wear out. Stamina-wise, I should’ve been fine—the issue was that the mental stress of a real fight for my life was taking

its toll. It felt so different from just making practice swings, and I wasn't used to moving so much without being able to take a break.

"How many more...are there...?" I asked through gasps for air.

Looking around, the villagers had slain a few orcs themselves, but over half of the pack remained. I could see the villagers were starting to get worn down as well.

"I-I need a stamina recovery herb... If only I had the time...!" I griped.

I'd be able to keep fighting without a problem that way, but the orcs weren't about to let me stop and cultivate. Worse, the orcs that were clamoring around the horses were now regrouping to hit us with a second wave of attacks.

Dammit!

We still outnumbered them, but we were losing momentum fast. All they had to do was keep charging headlong at us, whereas we had to stay calm and fight defensively to stand on even ground.

As I thought it over, though, a fourth orc charged at me with a squealing roar.

"If only I had some of those strength-enhancing herbs!" I muttered in irritation as I chopped at my opponent.

It probably wouldn't have been a total game-changer, but it would've at least helped me burn less energy. If all the villagers had those herbs, too, the fight might well be over by now.

That's not going to happen now, though, and I can't keep expecting Herb Cultivation to solve all my problems. I need to focus more on making it out of this mess alive!

"Hahh...hahh... Just die already!" I cried.

I hacked a heavy gash in the orc's hamstrings, causing it to tumble to the ground. It wasn't likely to get up anytime soon, but I made sure to finish it off just in case.

Wow...it's honestly kind of horrifying to think this is my first time. Am I getting used to it already?

Maybe it was just the adrenaline pumping through my veins, but any part of me that was reluctant to even hurt the orcs was now lost and forgotten.

“Squeeergh!!”

“Guh...!”

I heard a man’s scream, and turning, I realized that he must’ve slipped in the steadily pooling orc blood. His opponent didn’t hesitate to take advantage of the opportunity, hitting him with a heavy blow as he went down.

“Damn you, you pig!”

“Eyes over here!”

The man’s friends cut in to distract the orc, preventing it from continuing to whale on him. He stumbled to his feet a moment later, apparently not gravely wounded, but his sword arm dangled limply by his side. I couldn’t see very clearly from where I was, but the bone was probably broken.

Oh no... It looks like people are starting to get hurt.

I wanted to rush over and administer him some loe right away, but he was already swallowed up in the battle, and I lost sight of him. I gritted my teeth as I hacked at the orc that wandered in front of me.

I just need to take out as many orcs as possible... Every dead orc is another villager that makes it out unscathed.

As if to make a mockery of my renewed resolve, I spotted the injured man again through the crowd—and the orc raising its fist to strike him from behind.

“Look out!” I shouted.

He still didn’t take any notice, however, his wounded arm taking all his attention.

“Dammit! I’ve got to make it in time...!”

I ran through the throng, reaching the pair just as the orc swung downward. I extended my sword out between them, and with a loud *CLANG*, its fist contacted the flat of my blade. The injured man finally seemed to notice the danger he was in, and turning around, he swung his own sword with his good

arm. A few villagers around us took notice as well, joining in the attack.

“We got your back, sir!”

“Eat this!”

“Squeorgh...!”

After taking multiple heavy blows, the orc finally slumped dead to the ground.

“You okay, sir?!” the hurt man asked worriedly.

“Yeah, I’m okay. How about you?”

“Thanks to you, I’m just fine. I won’t be moving this arm for a while, though.”

“Don’t push yourself,” I told him. “If you can’t fight, then fall back to the village. I can heal an arm, but I can’t raise the dead!”

“Th-Thanks, sir. I don’t want to cause you any more trouble, now... Sorry.”

Even as he gritted his teeth in frustration, he fled toward safety.

I guess I could’ve phrased that better, but we’re struggling enough as-is without having to cover for the injured.

“Guooooorgh!” squealed a new orc as it charged me.

“Crap...!”

I managed to stumble out of its path at the last moment. Looking around, however, it seemed like the villagers who had helped me just a second before had already moved on to another orc. I was on my own—and that wasn’t the worst of it.

“Of all the times for my sword to break!”

Blocking the orc’s attack must have been my worn short sword’s limit. It was broken, cloven in half. Perhaps it was at the end of its natural life, given that it was on loan from Sebastian and I’d been using it extensively in practice, or maybe all the flesh and bone it’d been cutting at these past few minutes finally took its toll. Or maybe, it was my own inexperience that caused it to break so easily.

Jubilant that I hadn’t counterattacked yet, the orc lunged at me, swinging

wide with blow after blow, its grasping fingers searching to get a hold on me.

“Squeeee! Squeeee!”

“Ghh...!”

I was evading its onslaught so far, but I knew I couldn't keep running forever. I cast a glance down at the sword the wounded villager had dropped, but I didn't have enough breathing room to pick it up. The other villagers were busy with their own fights, and it didn't seem like I could rely on their help anytime soon.

What now?!

Suddenly, the orc stopped swinging and lowered its body shoulder first, throwing itself at me in a heavy body check. My thoughts were still occupied by the fallen sword, and not expecting the sudden change in tactic, all I could do was cross my arms in a hasty block.

“Squorgh!”

“GUH!”

It hit me square in the chest, knocking me a few steps back. Fortunately, it didn't have enough of a running start to hit me too hard, and I was still on my feet, although badly winded. The orc followed me forward, spreading its arms to grab me in a bear hug.

“*Hahh...* If only I had one of those physical-enhancing herbs... I could've dodged that...! I can't let it get a hold on me now!”

I managed to avoid its grab by leaning backward just before it hit. While I was trying to regain my balance, however, it raised both arms again to hit me with an overhand smash. Instead of trying to stand up, I instead kicked off its chest, using the force to send me staggering backward. Its dirty nails raked the air less than an inch from my face.

Maybe if I keep kicking it and tripping it up, I can beat it?

“No, I bet that won't hurt it at all... Wait, what?”

It took me a moment to realize that the orc had stopped attacking. In fact, it was frozen where it stood.

“Why...?”

I peered into its face and started in surprise at what I saw. Its eyes were dull and empty—it was dead.

“How?!”

I hurriedly stepped back to take a better look at it, and this time I froze at what I saw.

“No... There’s no way.”

In the middle of the orc’s chest—where I’d only barely touched it moments ago—a familiar little bunch of leaves was pushing its way through the monster’s skin.

“...Herb Cultivation?”

There was no mistaking it. What I’d seen happen in the ground countless times was now happening in the orc’s body—I’d cultivated an herb there.

“I was thinking about those physical-enhancing herbs, but...no way.”

I’d grown herbs by accident many times before, from the first time I grew capwort back in the Fenrir Forest until now, but I’d never thought this was possible.

I knew I could grow herbs anywhere, but I didn’t realize that meant literally anywhere.

“E-Ew... I really grew an herb in that gu—”

Suddenly, I felt a splitting pain hit the back of my head, and I nearly blacked out as I tumbled to the ground. I barely managed to stay conscious through sheer force of will, and as I shakily stood back up, I turned to face my attacker. The blow had at least helped me snap out of my daze.

“Squeersqueeoorgh!” An orc cackled at me, flexing its filthy fingers.

“Dammit... And after all the times Eckenhart warned me to never stand still in a fight!”

The battle was still raging on, and a little more than half the orcs were still standing. The villagers were all fighting for their lives, and I’d been standing

there gawking at a plant.

If only I'd remembered Eckenhart saying that sooner!

"Squeeer!" my new opponent smirked as I tried to stop my head from spinning.

"Th-This is bad..."

The orc seemed to be enjoying my pain. I had managed to scramble out of its reach, but I was in such agony that my body didn't want to move at all. I could only watch as it slowly clenched its fists and raised its arms for another heavy blow.

If it hits me again, I'm dead.

None of the villagers could spare the time to step in and save me. I could only watch as it brought its fists down on me.

After everything I said to the villagers about staying alive, it looks like I'll be the first to go... I just hope I'm the only one. Sorry, Leo.

Unable to watch, I clamped my eyes shut to better withstand the coming pain, my thoughts lingering on Leo for what might well be the last time...

"AROOOOO!!"

"Squogh?!"

At that moment, however, I heard a familiar howl rip across the battlefield, and the orc in front of me yelped in surprise.

I'm hearing things, aren't I? Oh god, am I already dead?

"Ruff? Wuff... Whine...?"

"Yeah, Leo sounded just like that... Whining with her cute little tail wagging like... Wait, huh?"

Instead of the orc's fist, however, a big, sloppy tongue hit me square in the face.

I know that tongue!

"Leo... Is that really you, Leo?!"

“Ruff!”

I opened my eyes to see Leo standing before me, as big and fluffy as ever.

But what’s Leo doing here? I thought she went to the mansion?

“Squoooooorgh!”

Leo cast a dark look at the new orc that was charging at me before looking back at me.

“Wooooo. Ruff, roooooooooooo... BARK!”

“W-Wait, Leo... Ugh...”

My head was still hurting too much to move, but I at least managed to call her name. I watched hazily as she sprung at the charging orc with all the force of a hurricane, sending bloody chunks of monster scattering everywhere before leaping onto the next ones with outstretched claws.

If Leo’s here, then we’ll all make it out okay.

“I-I... I’m alive, right...?”

My head was still throbbing, but a few deep breaths helped lessen the agony somewhat. With a little effort, I’d hopefully be able to move now. As I looked around, I could see that the villagers were all staring at Leo in shock. There wasn’t a living orc left in the fray.

Yeah, you’re not just imagining it. She really is that strong.

“Good... It looks like everyone’s okay...” I sighed.

Better yet, I couldn’t see anyone lying on the ground. A few people were hurt, but as long as they were still alive, they’d be okay.

“Mr. Hirooka!” Hannes called out, running toward me.

“Hannes! You’re okay!”

“I’m glad to see that you’re still in one piece as well. Tell me, was that Miss Leo just now?”

“Yeah. She saved my life.”

“I daresay she saved all our lives. Why, I don’t know how we could possibly

thank you..."

Looking at Hannes, it seemed like he only had bumps and bruises. Leo was picking off the few orcs that were further from the gates or had tried to flee.

Wow, she's strong.

"I barely did a thing, really," I said. "All I managed to do was buy a little time. If you want to thank someone, make it Leo."

"I have every intention of doing so, of course, but I always award credit where it's due. If you hadn't held the orcs at bay in the very beginning, we wouldn't have even been able to arm ourselves, let alone hold them off at the gate. Why, I was quite moved to see you risking your life for us."

"Well, uh... I'm glad I could help."

"Without you, I've no doubt Lange would be in utter shambles by now."

I couldn't help but feel like he was exaggerating a little bit, but I was honestly happy that even my little bit of training had paid off. I didn't kill many orcs myself, but my magic was able to slow them all down quite a bit.

"Yeah, I guess so..."

The wound on my head started to throb dully again, and I clenched my teeth against the pain.

"M-Mr. Hirooka? Are you hurt?!"

"Yeah, it's just a little bump... Don't worry, it's only pain. I can still stand and everything."

Given all the chaos, I wasn't surprised he hadn't noticed my injuries until now. I certainly didn't know who was hurt in all that fighting.

"We'd best get you medical attention right away," he insisted, a sorry note in his voice. "I'm so dreadfully sorry I didn't take notice sooner."

"No, really, I'm fine. I'm sure there are other people hurt way worse than I am, so you should get them treated first."

Really, I'm feeling right as rain, aside from that weird throbbing pain. Look, some of the villagers are too tired to even stand up.

“Ruff!” Leo strode back toward me, tail high with pride.

“Oh, Leo? All done?”

“Ra-ruff!”

“Thank you very much for your efforts, Miss Leo.”

Casting a quick look back toward the wagons, I saw there wasn’t a single living orc in sight.

That’s about what I expected from her.

“Thanks for coming, girl. You saved us.” I patted her on the flank as best I could.

“Ruff, ruff! Wooooo-wooooo!” She wagged happily.

“But what’re you doing here? Didn’t you take Phillip back to the villa?”

“Wuff? Ruff, wuff-wuff, woof, woo-woo. Bark, ruff, bark, bark! Rooo, roo, ru-roo?”

She tried to explain, but for some reason, I couldn’t piece together what she was saying. It felt almost like a dense fog was creeping its way through my head, and I had to struggle to think straight.

That’s weird... I can understand her so easily most of the time...

“Sorry, Leo. Could you repeat that? A little more simply this time, maybe?”

“Wuff...” Her ears drooped sadly.

Sorry... I’m really trying.

“Maybe I can explain for her, then?” came a woman’s familiar voice from behind me.

Wait, there’s no way she’s here... But if Leo’s here, maybe there’s a chance?

Epilogue

“**CLAIRE...?** What are you doing here?!”

“Miss Leo gave me a ride, of course. I’m surprised she was able to go as fast as she did with all three of us riding her.”

I turned around, still pressing the bump on my head, to find a woman whose blonde hair shone even in the dim moonlight—Claire.

“The three of you? Who else is here?” I asked.

“We can talk about that later. First, we need to clean up this mess.”

“Oh, right. Of course.”

She turned to Hannes. “Could you please see that the injured receive medical attention? You can have the able-bodied villagers start cleaning up this mess.”

He nodded shakily. “O-Of course, my lady! I happen to know a few individuals who are quite adept at disposing of bodies, so I’ll put them to it right away!”

First I couldn’t understand Leo, and now Claire isn’t answering me... I guess taking care of the wounded comes first, though. I’ll have plenty of time to hear her side of things later.

I watched as Hannes left to give directions to the others.

“By the way, Takumi,” Claire said, turning back to me, “I couldn’t help but notice that you’ve been holding your— Is that blood? Are you hurt?!”

“Ruff?!”

“Uh, a little. An orc smacked me pretty good.”

I get that she’s surprised, but I wish she wouldn’t yell like that. I wish Leo would quiet down a little, too... My ears are ringing like crazy. I’m glad they care about me so much, though.

“Sorry, Takumi, I’ll have to take a closer look.” She brushed my hand aside so

she could see my wound, her eyes growing wide. “Oh, my! Johanna! I need you!”

“Of course, milady!”

Johanna rushed over from where she’d been treating a villager.

Huh. I didn’t notice her before... And is that Phillip I see over there?

“We need to treat Takumi immediately! His wound looks horrible!” Claire said loudly.

“Understood!”

Leo flattened her ears sadly. *“Whiiiiiiine...”*

“C’mon, it’s not that bad,” I told her. “I should be able to just sleep it off. It hurts, but it’s nothing worth yelling over... You don’t have to look so sad either, Leo.”

I smiled as best I could through the throbbing pain. It couldn’t be that bad, after all. I pet Leo with my free hand to reassure her as best as I could.

“It *is* that bad!” Claire insisted. “Why, you should see how much you’re bleeding. Even a light head wound can be fatal, you know! We need to get you treated immediately!”

“Huh? I’m bleeding? I guess that’d explain a few things...” I mumbled.

I couldn’t feel the blood at all, but to be honest, I couldn’t feel much of anything. That would explain the weird wet sensation under my hand, though. My senses-enhancing herb had worn off already, and I couldn’t make out the blood in the moonlight.

No wonder it’s still hurting like hell...

“Please use this,” Claire said as she pulled out her handkerchief.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t. I don’t want to stain it.”

“You’re far more important to me than some silly piece of fabric!” She turned and shouted, “Johanna!!”

“Excuse me, Mr. Hirooka.”

Johanna took the handkerchief from Claire and pressed it over my hand. It didn't make it hurt less, but having another person touching it helped put me at ease somewhat.

"He's bleeding a lot," she muttered. "We'd better find a way to close the wound soon."

"Why don't we try some loe?" Claire suggested.

"Loe would probably work, so long as we apply it before he loses too much blood. Since he hasn't lost consciousness yet, I imagine he'll make it."

"O-Okay," I stammered dumbly. "Gimme a sec... I'll make some."

"Are you sure you're able to?"

"It hurts, but I should be fine."

I could still feel my legs enough to stand, so that probably meant my wound wasn't going to kill me. They probably didn't have any loe on hand, though, so I'd have to cultivate it myself. I crouched down, placing my hand on the ground.

"Oh, if only I'd thought to bring some from the mansion," Claire worried. "I suppose we don't have much choice now. Johanna, get Phillip over here. We need to make sure nobody sees him cultivating."

"As you will!" came Johanna's reply.

"Miss Leo? Could I ask you to help shield him with your body?"

"Ruff!"

Moments after Claire gave everyone their orders, Phillip and Johanna came and crouched down around me. I could even feel Leo's fluff wrap around me from behind.

She's so soft and comfy... Wait. I should probably be focusing on growing loe now...

I had a hard time keeping my balance crouching, however, and my hand refused to do what I wanted. Crouching down must have changed my circulation somewhat, and it almost felt like I was floating away. Fortunately, I felt Claire stoop down and wrap her arm around my shoulders to support me,

making sure my hand was planted firmly.

“Oh...thanks,” I mumbled. “Thank you too, Leo... Thank you, Claire...”

“Please, don’t mention it. It’s the least we can do.”

“Okay... Lemme get started...”

I focused on loe as hard as I could, and as I felt it spring up between my fingers, I let out a heavy sigh of relief. I plucked a leaf off the stem.

“Okay, now just to prepare it for...oof...”

Just as I was about to use Herb Cultivation again, however, I was hit by another wave of dizziness and nearly passed out. I fell forward, dropping the loe to clumsily catch myself with both hands right before my face hit the ground. I couldn’t tell if it was the relief hitting me all at once or if I’d really lost that much blood, but I could rapidly feel myself slipping away.

“Takumi?!” Claire cried out in shock. “Quick, Johanna, the loe!”

“Of course!”

Claire hurriedly snatched up the loe, and I could barely see her hand it to Johanna, who peeled the outer layer off with her sword.

Oh, that’s right. I don’t need to use Herb Cultivation to prepare it, I thought numbly.

Johanna handed the loe back to Claire, who pressed the exposed gel onto my head. The pain instantly tripled as though she’d pressed a red-hot iron onto it.

“Ngh?!” I cried out.

“I’m sure it must hurt, but please, try to bear it!”

I’d never been in such agony before in my life. My head was clear in an instant, though I couldn’t tell if that was the loe at work or my whole body going into shock. I started flailing in a reflexive attempt to get away, but Claire wrapped herself tightly around me so that I couldn’t escape. All I could do was scream and try to bear it.

After a while, though, I could feel the agony slowly ebbing away, replaced with the lukewarm feeling of the loe against my head.

Wow... This is what herbal healing is like. Did Cherie have to go through pain like that when I saved her life back then? No, I guess she was unconscious the whole time... She probably doesn't even remember it.

"How do you feel?" Claire asked. "Any better?"

"U-Uh... I'm fine!" I hurriedly pulled away from her, then stood up and did some light stretching to make sure everything still worked. "See? It doesn't even hurt now! I'm not going to faint, either!"

I'm not embarrassed that Claire was hugging me like that, no. Not at all.

She let out a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank goodness!"

Even Phillip and Johanna seemed relieved, and Leo let out a happy whimper as she nuzzled me with her giant nose.

Sorry for worrying you all like that...

"Oh, right! I need to ask you something, Claire," I said.

"Is something wrong?"

The orcs were dead and gone, but in my relief, I remembered a potentially bigger issue. The doll merchant and his assistant were still at large. It'd been a while since they rode off, but if we headed after them right away, we had a chance of catching them.

"Did you pass two men on your way here? They were probably riding fast and headed toward Ractos."

We were at the west gate of the village, which was in the Ractos direction. There was a chance they'd gone off the road or turned somewhere, but it was a solid first guess.

"Come to think of it, I think we did. We couldn't get a very good look at them, however, since Miss Leo was running close by the forest, away from the road."

"That's got to be them, then."

"Who were they? We were so focused on reaching the village that we didn't stop to question them, but they certainly seemed suspicious."

"They're the ones who planted that doll here," I explained. "They released the

orcs on Lange!”

If they rode past Claire, though, that meant they were almost certainly making for Ractos. Since they were likely affiliated with Count Bastler and the Yugard store, catching them would almost guarantee us concrete evidence against them—but more than that, they had to pay for what they did to Lange.

“They released the orcs, they spread the disease... They’re almost definitely in league with the Yugard store, too. We’ve got to catch up with them!” I exclaimed in a rush.

Claire nodded. “Yes, it sounds like we’d best find out all they know. We’ll leave at once, then. Johanna?”

“Yes, milady?”

“I’ll need you to borrow horses from Hannes and make for Ractos immediately. They’re on horseback, so every second is precious.”

“As you will!”

“Hold on a minute,” I cut in.

“Is something wrong, Takumi?”

There’s a better way to catch up with them.

“Let’s take Leo instead. She won’t have any trouble catching up to them.”

Claire nodded slowly. “Yes, but shouldn’t she stay with you?”

“I’m going with you, of course. Isn’t that right, Leo?”

“Ruff!”

Leo was our best chance at catching them, and if I went with them, there’d be no reason not to take her.

Besides, they sicced orcs on Lange. That makes this personal.

My wound was all sealed up, and while I was still a little lightheaded from the blood loss and the lengthy fight, I could make a stamina-replenishing herb easily enough.

Claire hesitated for a moment. “I wish you’d take some time to rest...but if

you insist, I won't stop you. Johanna, you'll come with us."

"As you will."

I'm glad she agreed so easily.

Even if Leo was with me, though, I wouldn't be able to rest with those two villains at large. Having Johanna with us would be a great relief as well—our goal was to capture them alive, after all, not kill them like we did the orcs.

"Sorry for making you run back and forth so much, girl," I said as I patted Leo on the flank. "We're counting on you."

"Ra-rooooo!" *Leave it to me!*

She crouched down so that the three of us could climb on. Phillip looked a little tired from all the travel he'd been doing, but I knew he was just the guy to help with the village's wounded and dispose of all the orc bodies.

Don't worry, I'll make you a fatigue-relieving herb later.

"Let's get going, then," I said. "We're headed for Ractos, right?"

Claire nodded. "That's the direction I saw the men riding in, at least."

"All right then, Leo, let's do this. You can go as fast as you want, as long as nobody gets shaken off along the way."

"Ruff, ruff. Arooooo!"

Standing up with a reassuring howl, she sprinted off into the night.

Those merchants hurt countless innocent people. I won't let them off the hook so easily!

Extra: Sebastian's Lecture on Monsters

I, Sebastian, cast my gaze over the butler's offices, making sure everyone was present and accounted for. Aside from myself, there was Mr. Hirooka, Miss Leo, and Cherie. I was seated at my usual desk while Mr. Hirooka took a seat across from me, and Miss Leo sat obediently at his side. Cherie, of course, was curled up in his lap.

"Without further ado, I would like to introduce you to more about this world," I said.

My principal student was naturally Mr. Hirooka. He had spent precious little time in this world thus far, and I felt it would help him to learn more about his new home.

"Do you mean magic?" he asked.

"Ruff?"

"Arf?"

All three of them cocked their heads to the side curiously.

Ah, what endearing coordination.

Naturally, Mr. Hirooka's attention was drawn most to magic, but that was not the topic of today's lesson.

"Today, I should like to talk about monsters," I announced. "You didn't have monsters in your old world, did you?"

"No, not really. We have wild animals, of course, but they seem to be quite different. I guess I'm not surprised, since we didn't have mana or magic either," he explained.

What a peaceful world that must be... A land without monsters.

I couldn't help but feel a tinge of jealousy. I resolved to ask him for more details on the matter later.

“That certainly fits the logic, then,” I said. “You see, monsters cannot exist without mana—it’s what defines them on a fundamental level.”

His brow furrowed. “But humans need mana to live too, right?”

“In the grand scheme of things, one could indeed call humans a breed of monster. However, we avoid such phrasing in common society. In the interest of keeping to the point, think of the difference as an extent of monsterhood.”

To describe the differences in any appreciable detail would take a long time indeed. I decided to save such a lecture for another day after Mr. Hirooka had experienced more of the nuances of this world.

“But Leo and Cherie are monsters, right?” he asked. “Orcs and trollds are too.”

“Indeed. And while all of them possess the inherent prerequisites of using magic, neither orcs nor trollds have ever been known to use it.” Such mentions were void not only from the oral tradition, but the literature as well. “They move on naught but instinct alone, and it’s thought they lack even the concept of magic itself.”

“Yeah, they always just attack people on sight. Not that I’ve ever seen a living trolld before... Leo killed the ones in the forest before I had the chance,” Mr. Hirooka said.

Miss Leo raised her snout and snorted. “Fruff!”

I suppose this is what Mr. Hirooka would refer to as her “proud” face.

Our only trolld encounter had been rather brief, as we’d encountered them in the process of saving Cherie in the Fenrir Forest. Miss Leo had rushed ahead of us and finished them off before I could even lay eyes on them. I simply counted myself lucky to have avoided the confrontation.

“The largest difference between Miss Leo or Cherie and the likes of orcs and trollds is the extent to which they rely on their instincts,” I explained. “Even if they are incapable of speaking human language, they can understand and process our words and intent.”

“Wa-woof!”

“Arf, arf!”

They both began singing. Even without being able to comprehend their exact words, I could tell they agreed with my assessment.

“Naturally, different families of monsters have their own distinct features. Regardless of such matters as instinct and reason or magic adept or inept, what I wish to impart to you now is how you should act when encountering one.”

“Wait, you want to teach me that?” he asked, sounding surprised by my lecture topic.

“Indeed. When we last visited the forest, you had drawn your blade, but never once did you endeavor to draw closer to a monster. Now that you have learned how to fight from His Grace, however, things may be different.”

“Aa-Ahaha... I’m just not very comfortable fighting living things...” he confessed.

There was also the fact that Miss Leo was present to protect him, but even when given the opportunity to fight, not once did Mr. Hirooka move to attack. Reasoning that it must be a product of his otherworldly upbringing, I resolved to educate him further on this matter. Should the need arise for him to fight, he must be able to defend himself. While he was indeed a most gentle individual, he was hardly the type to stand by and let others get hurt.

“Aside from the rare exception like Miss Leo and Cherie, all monsters attack humans,” I stated firmly. “Some may only target the weak, while others will kill at random, but it is a common trait nearly all of them share.”

“Come to think of it, the orcs were even willing to charge right at Leo.”

“Exactly. They, like trollds, are the type to attack and kill indiscriminately.”

In fact, their urge to kill seemed so deeply ingrained that some researchers theorized they would do so upon encountering anything not of their own race. Thus, such monsters proved horribly dangerous to the common folk.

“Why do they attack people like that, though?” Mr. Hirooka asked.

“That, we do not know. One theory is that their internal mana has driven them insane to the point that they utilize violence to an excess. However, that fails to account for the fact that humans also possess mana, but are not

homicidal killing machines. Miss Leo and Cherie are likewise proof against said theory.”

“Ru-ruff.”

“Ar-arf!”

Both Miss Leo and Cherie nodded appreciatively. Nothing about their manner indicated reasonless beasts.

“Is it because they eat people?” he asked.

“True, some monsters do in fact hunt to eat.”

“That explains it, then.”

“Regrettably, it isn’t so simple. To use orcs yet again as an example, there’s no recorded case of one eating a human. Some reports even indicate that after slaying a human, they simply leave the carcass undisturbed.”

As unpleasant as it was to consider, there were indeed monsters that fed primarily on humans. Orcs, however, were not such a monster. If memory served me well, there was even a case of an orc brutalizing some poor soul, then immediately going to hunt and feed on another monster. Besides, the truly indiscriminate nature of orc attacks couldn’t be blamed on an empty stomach alone.

“I think I get it,” Mr. Hirooka said with a nod. “So, if I ever see a monster, I need to either fight it or start running.”

“Precisely. Given Miss Leo’s presence, I doubt you should ever find yourself in such dire straits, but you had best be prepared to do so nonetheless.”

“Woooo-wooo!”

He chuckled. “Thanks, Leo. I appreciate it.”

“Arf!”

“Um... I didn’t catch that, Cherie, but you were agreeing with Leo, right? Thanks,” Mr. Hirooka said, patting Cherie on the head.

Unfortunately, I hadn’t the slightest idea what they were saying. My best guess was that Miss Leo asserted she’d never leave him alone, or something to

that effect, and Cherie echoed the sentiment.

While it was all good and well that he had bodyguards, I was still concerned about his own resolve. Regardless of the circumstances, any encounter with a monster required composure and determination.

“I would encourage you to mentally prepare yourself, nonetheless. You must never hesitate against a monster, regardless of whether it be an orc, trolld, or otherwise,” I cautioned him.

He nodded. “I know. Eckenhart told me the same thing. If I ever hesitate in battle, that means opening myself up to getting hurt.”

“Oh? It seems I have unwittingly repeated His Grace’s teachings. Perhaps I should have left the matter alone.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m glad to know a little more about monsters now. Thanks.”

“To be of use is this humble butler’s greatest pleasure. I was rather pleased to explain it to you.”

“Haha, you do like explaining stuff, after all.”

“Ra-ruff!”

“Awwf!”

I chuckled. “I’m afraid sharing my knowledge has become something of a hobby of mine.”

I’ve always greatly enjoyed sharing what I’ve found in books or elsewhere, and I make a habit of doing so whenever presented with a chance. Even so, I had to admit that teaching Mr. Hirooka was its own unique pleasure. He had an excellent head on his shoulders and was most eager to learn. In fact, I had even been reading through old reference materials in my spare time so that I could teach him better—though my recent work had left me little room for such luxuries.

I’ve no doubt he’ll take every necessary precaution now. Should he ever be gravely hurt, I fear Miss Leo may be unstoppable in her rage, and I shudder to think what may happen to milady under such circumstances.

I was quite confident that no ill would befall him in the mansion, and His

Grace likewise would never purposefully harm him.

With that, I ended my lecture. Should the time come again that I would need to impart new knowledge to him, I would gladly open my doors to him once more.

Afterword

HELLO, everyone. It's been quite some time. Thank you very much for following me thus far through the first and second volumes. This volume marks the first time Takumi and Leo leave the mansion to head somewhere totally new. I must admit, I was rather relieved that Takumi was finally able to go on the trip I'd been planning for him from the start (See: Volume 1 Afterword).

Anyone following the story from the web version may also notice that a few names and characters have changed, not to mention the side stories and extras. Takumi's big fight scene at the end was almost completely rewritten. I hope you enjoy all the new content this official release brings!

Well then, without further ado, allow me to thank those involved in the production of this book.

First of all, I have Ririnra to thank for continuing their stellar work throughout these three volumes. The illustrations are gorgeous, and the character designs came out marvelously. Thank you very much!

I am also incredibly grateful for my editors Kawaguchi and Higuchi, as well as the rest of the hard-working staff at GC Novels. Without you, I wouldn't have been able to publish three whole novels. I really appreciate your help.

Of course, I also must thank everyone who sent in pictures of their adorable doggos for the wraparound. Thank you, Ponpokorine, for your delightful picture of Kinako. The way their mouth hangs open shows off their mischievous side in the cutest way imaginable. Also, thanks to Saki for sending in Kukurū's sweet picture. The way they're looking up as though howling is just the cutest form of begging I've seen. Thank you very much!

Finally, I would like to thank all the readers who have followed me here from the web novels, as well as those joining me here for the volume releases. None of this would be possible without you.

I hope that we'll have the chance to meet again in the fourth volume. Until then, take care.



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Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!



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